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. . . and a dying Earth, where escape means the death of the universe.

**15 VIEWS OF INFINITE TOMORROW
AS FORECAST BY THE FANTASTIC
MINDS OF THE BEST SPECULATIVE
WRITERS OF TODAY!**

INFINITY THREE

Edited by Robert Hoskins

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A LANCER BOOK

INFINITY THREE

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Printed in Canada

LANCER BOOKS, INC. • 1560 BROADWAY
NEW YORK, N.Y. 10036



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1999/4-3108/5

Introduction:

A TIME OF CHANGES

The old order changeth, yielding place to new . . .

The past twelve months (as this is written, in early February) have seen many near-unthinkable changes in the inner world of science-fantasy fiction. Foremost was the death of two of the true giants of the field—John Campbell and August Derleth. The first was responsible for perhaps single-handedly shaping the course of modern *science* fiction; the latter deserves honor for having kept strong the public interest in occult and horror fantasy at a time when the world seemed to be turning away from a belief in a state of existence beyond that of the mundane universe.

Now (and not for the first time) science seems to be adapting the pet theories of science fiction. Recent articles in the New York *Times* have seriously discussed the existence of alternate universes, co-existing with our own yet with their own perhaps very different basic laws of nature. The casual daily reader of the *Times* would find no suggestion that these speculations are offered only as wild theories, almost fantasies; the intent would seem to be that the theories are now generally accepted by even the staidest of the scientific community.

An alternate universe is such a handy thing, really, for the physicist. Got a problem that would seem to violate the (presumed) basic laws of nature? Dump it into an alternate universe, and you may smile as you dust off your hands. No one can deny the logic of your action, for no one can prove the non-existence of your (mental) creation.

I for one very much hope that there are other universes, and that there really is a way around the limitations of light speed, a way that will enable us to some day soon reach other star systems, but some of the new publicists of our dream-desires seem to be acting in panic. The universe is not as simple as they would wish, and they are striving to save the work of years, if not lifetimes.

Still, for whatever reason they may have for wanting to share our secret wishings, they are welcome. They and all those who have laughed at starry-eyed fanatics over the past forty years or so—the span of time that encompassed the careers of Campbell and Derleth. As for them, they are already sorely missed. But science-fantasy fiction has not died with them. There is and will be a bright future for the genre of speculative fiction.

The two may never be physically replaced, and will always be remembered, but there are others, writers and editors, who are now shaping the s-f of the next forty years. Whatever happens, it will be at least an interesting time to be alive.

—Robert Hoskins

The world is the loneliest of places . . .

CALIBAN

Robert Silverberg

They have all changed their faces to a standard model. It is the latest thing, which should not be confused with the latest Thing. The latest Thing is me. The latest thing, the latest fad, the latest rage, is for them all to change their faces to a standard model. I have no idea how it is done but I think it is genetic, with the RNA, the DNA, the NDA. Only retroactive. They all come out with blond wavy hair and sparkling blue eyes. And long straight faces with sharp cheekbones. And notched chins and thin lips curling in ironic smiles. Even the black ones: thin lips, blue eyes, blond wavy hair. And pink skins. They all look alike now. The sweet Aryanized world. Our entire planet. Except me. Meee.

* * *

I am imperfect. I am blemished. I am unforgiving. I am the latest Thing.

* *

Louisiana said, Would you like to copulate with me? You are so strange. You are so beautiful. Oh, how I de-

sire you, strange being from a strange time. My orifices are yours.

It was a thoughtful offer. I considered it a while, thinking she might be trying to patronize me. At length I notified her of my acceptance. We went to a public copulatorium. Louisiana is taller than I am and her hair is a torrent of spun gold. Her eyes are blue and her face is long and straight. I would say she is about twenty-three years old. In the copulatorium she dissolved her clothes and stood naked before me. She was wearing golden pubic hair that day and her belly was flat and taut. Her breasts were round and slightly elongated and the nipples were very small. Go on, she said, now you dissolve your clothes.

I said, I am afraid to because my body is ugly and you will mock me.

Your body is not ugly, she said. Your body is strange but it is not ugly.

My body is ugly, I insisted. My legs are short and they curve outward and my thighs have bulging muscles and I have black hairy hair all over me. Like an ape. And there is this hideous scar on my belly.

A scar?

Where they took out my appendix, I told her.

This aroused her beyond all probability. Her nipples stood up tall and her face became flushed.

Your appendix? Your appendix was removed?

Yes, I said, it was done when I was fourteen years old, and I have a loathsome red scar on my abdomen.

She asked, What year was it when you were fourteen?

I said, It was 1967, I think.

She laughed and clapped her hands and began to dance around the room. Her breasts bounced up and down but her long flowing silken hair soon covered them, leaving only the stubby pinkish nipples poking through like buttons. 1967! she cried. Fourteen! Your appendix was removed! 1967!

Then she turned to me and said, My grandfather was born in 1967, I think. How terribly ancient you are. My

helix-father's father on the countermolecular side. I didn't realize you were so very ancient.

Ancient and ugly, I said.

Not ugly, only strange, she said.

Strange and ugly, I said. Strangely ugly.

We think you are beautiful, she said. Will you dissolve your clothes now? It would not be pleasing to me to copulate with you if you keep your clothes on.

There, I said, and boldly revealed myself. The bandy legs. The hairy chest. The scarred belly. The bulging shoulders. The short neck. She has seen my lopsided face, she can see my dismal body as well. If that is what she wants.

She threw herself upon me, gasping and making soft noises.



What did Louisiana look like before the change came? Did she have dull stringy hair thick lips a hook nose bushy black eyebrows no chin foul breath one breast bigger than the other splay feet crooked teeth little dark hairs around her nipples a bulging navel too many dimples in her buttocks skinny thighs blue veins in her calves protruding ears? And then did they give her the homogenizing treatment and make her the golden creature she is today? How long did it take? What were the costs? Did the government subsidize the process? Were the large corporations involved? How were these matters handled in the socialist countries? Was there anyone who did not care to be changed? Perhaps Louisiana was born this way. Perhaps her beauty is natural. In any society there are always a few whose beauty is natural.



Dr. Habakkuk and Senator Mandragore spent a great deal of time questioning me in the Palazzo of Mirrors.

**TABLE 2. AMINO ACID SUBSTITUTIONS
IN POLYPEPTIDE ANTIBIOTICS**

ANTIBIOTIC FAMILY	AMINO ACID IN THE MAJOR COMPONENT	REPLACEMENT
Actinomycins	D-Valine L-Proline	D-Alloisoleucine 4-Hydroxy-L-proline 4-Keto-L-proline Sarcosine Pipelicolic acid Azetidine-2-carboxylic acid
Bacitracins	L-Valine	L-Isoleucine
Bottromycins	L-Proline	3-Methyl-L-proline
Gramicidin A	L-Leucine	L-Isoleucine
Ilamycins	N-Methyl-L-leucine	N-Methyl-L- γ -formyl- norvaline
Polymyxins	D-Phenylalanine L-Isoleucine	D-Leucine L-Leucine
Quinoxaline antibiotics	N-Methyl-L-valine	N-Methyl-L-isoleucine
Sporidesmolides	D-Valine	A-Alloisoleucine
Tyrocidine	L-Phenylalanine D-Phenylalanine	L-Tryptophan D-Tryptophan
Vernamycin B	D-Alanine	D-Butyrine

* * *

They put a green plastic dome over my head so that everything I said would be recorded with the proper nuance and intensity. Speak to us, they said. We are fascinated by your antique accent. We are enthralled by your primitive odors. Do you realize that you are our sole representative of the nightmare out of which we have awakened? Tell us, said the Senator, tell us about your brutally competitive civilization. Describe in detail the fouling of the environment. Explain the nature of na-

tional rivalry. Compare and contrast methods of political discourse in the Soviet Union and in the United States. Let us have your analysis of the sociological implications of the first voyage to the moon. Would you like to see the moon? Can we offer you any psychedelic drugs? Did you find Louisiana sexually satisfying? We are so glad to have you here. We regard you as a unique spiritual treasure. Speak to us of yesterday's yesterdays, while we listen entranced and enraptured.

*

Louisiana says that she is eighty-seven years old. Am I to believe this? There is about her a springtime freshness. No, she maintains, I am eighty-seven years old. I was born on March-alternate 11, 2022. Does that depress you? Is my great age frightening to you? See how tight my skin is. See how my teeth gleam. Why are you so disturbed? I am, after all, much younger than you.

* * *

TABLE XIX

Some Less Likely but Important Possibilities

1. "True" artificial intelligence
2. Practical use of sustained fusion to produce neutrons and-or energy
3. Artificial growth of new limbs and organs (either *in situ* or for later transplantation)
4. Room temperature superconductors
5. Major use of rockets for commercial or private transportation (either terrestrial or extraterrestrial)
6. Effective chemical or biological treatment for most mental illnesses
7. Almost complete control of marginal changes in heredity
8. Suspended animation (for years or centuries)

9. Practical materials with nearly "theoretical limit" strength
10. Conversion of mammals (humans?) to fluid breathers
11. Direct input into human memory banks
12. Direct augmentation of human mental capacity by the mechanical or electrical interconnection of the brain with a computer
13. Major rejuvenation and-or significant extension of vigor and life span—say 100 to 150 years
14. Chemical or biological control of character or intelligence
15. Automated highways
16. Extensive use of moving sidewalks for local transportation
17. Substantial manned lunar or planetary installations
18. Electric power available for less than .3 mill per kilowatt hour
19. Verification of some extrasensory phenomena
20. Planetary engineering
21. Modification of the solar system
22. Practical laboratory conception and nurturing of animal (human?) fetuses
23. Production of a drug equivalent to Huxley's soma
24. A technological equivalent of telepathy
25. Some direct control of individual thought processes

* *

I understand that in some cases making the great change involved elaborate surgery. Cornea transplants and cosmetic adjustment of the facial structure. A great deal of organ-swapping went on. There is not much permanence among these people. They are forever exchanging segments of themselves for new and improved segments. I am told that among some advanced groups the use of mechanical limb-interfaces has come to be com-

mon, in order that new arms and legs may be plugged in with a minimum of trouble. This is truly an astonishing era. Even so, their women seem to copulate in the old ways: knees up thighs apart, lying on right side left leg flexed, back to the man and knees slightly bent, etc., etc., etc. One might think they would have invented something new by this time. But perhaps the possibilities for innovation in the sphere of erotics are not extensive. Can I suggest anything? What if the woman unplugs both arms and both legs and presents her mere torso to the man? Helpless! Vulnerable! Quintessentially feminine! I will discuss it with Louisiana. But it would be just my luck that her arms and legs don't come off.

* * *

On the first para-Wednesday of every month Lieutenant Hotchkiss gives me lessons in fluid-breathing. We go to one of the deepest sub-levels of the Extravagance Building, where there is a special hyperoxygenated pool, for the use of beginners only, circular in shape and not at all deep. The water sparkles like opal. Usually the pool is crowded with children but Lieutenant Hotchkiss arranges for me to have private instruction since I am shy about revealing my body. Each lesson is much like the one before. Lieutenant Hotchkiss descends the gentle ramp that leads one into the pool. He is taller than I am and his hair is golden and his eyes are blue. Sometimes I have difficulties distinguishing him from Dr. Habakkuk and Senator Mandragore. In a casual moment the lieutenant confided that he is ninety-eight years old and therefore not really a contemporary of Louisiana's, although Louisiana has hinted that on several occasions in the past she has allowed the lieutenant to fertilize her ova. I doubt this inasmuch as reproduction is quite uncommon in this area and what probability is there that she would have permitted him to do it more than once? I think she believes that by telling me such things she will

stimulate emotions of jealousy in me, since she knows that the primitive ancients were frequently jealous. Regardless of all this Lieutenant Hotchkiss proceeds to enter the water. It reaches his navel, his broad hairless chest, his throat, his chin, his sensitive thin-walled nostrils. He submerges and crawls about on the floor of the pool. I see his golden hair glittering through the opal water. He remains totally submerged for eight or twelve minutes, now and again lifting his hands above the surface and wagging them as if to show me where he is. Then he comes forth. Water streams from his nostrils but he is not in the least out of breath. Come on, now, he says. You can do it. It's as easy as it looks. He beckons me toward the ramp. Any child can do it, the lieutenant assures me. It's a matter of control and determination. I shake my head. No, I say, genetic modification has something to do with it. My lungs aren't equipped to handle water, although I suppose yours are. The lieutenant merely laughs. Come on, come on, into the water. And I go down the ramp. How the water glows and shimmers! It reaches my navel, my black-matted chest, my throat, my chin, my wide thick nostrils. I breathe it in and choke and splutter; and I rush up the ramp, struggling for air. With the water a leaden weight in my lungs. I throw myself exhausted to the marble floor and cry out, No, no, no, it's impossible. Lieutenant Hotchkiss stands over me. His body is without flaw. He says, You've got to try to cultivate the proper attitudes. Your mental set determines everything. Let's think more positively about this business of breathing under water. Don't you realize that it's a major evolutionary step, one of the grand and glorious things separating our species from the australopithecines? Don't you want to be part of the great leap forward? Up, now. Try again. Thinking positively all the time. Carrying in your mind the distinction between yourself and our bestial ancestors. Go in. In. In. And I go in. And moments later burst from the water, choking and

spluttering. This takes place on the first para-Wednesday of every month. The same thing, every time.

* *

When you are talking on the telephone and your call is abruptly cut off, do you worry that the person on the other end will think you have hung up on him? Do you suspect that the person on the other end has hung up on you? Such problems are unknown here. These people make very few telephone calls. We are beyond mere communication in this era, Louisiana sometimes remarks.

*

Through my eyes these people behold their shining plastic epoch in proper historical perspective. They must see it as the present, which is always the same. But to me it is the future and so I have the true observer's parallax: I can say, it once was like *that* and now it is like *this*. They prize my gift. They treasure me. People come from other continents to run their fingers over my face. They tell me how much they admire my asymmetry. And they ask me many questions. Most of them ask about their own era rather than about mine. Such questions as:

Does suspended animation tempt you?

Was the fusion plant overwhelming in its implications of contained might?

Can you properly describe interconnection of the brain with a computer as an ecstatic experience?

Do you approve of modification of the solar system?

And also there are those who make more searching demands on my critical powers, such as Dr. Habakkuk and Senator Mandragore. They ask such questions as:

Was the brevity of your lifespan a hindrance to the development of the moral instincts?

Do you find our standardization of appearance at all abhorrent?

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What was your typical emotional response to the sight of the dung of some wild animal in the streets?

Can you quantify the intensity of your feelings concerning the transience of human institutions?

I do my best to serve their needs. Often it is a strain to answer them in meaningful ways, but I strive to do so. Wondering occasionally if it would not have been more valuable for them to interrogate a Neanderthal. Or one of Lieutenant Hotchkiss' australopithecines. I am perhaps not primitive enough, though I do have my own charisma, nevertheless.

* * *

Members of the new animal phylum, Gnathostomulida, recently discovered in Europe, have now been found in unexpected abundance and diversity along the east coast of the United States.

Two million animal species have been described, but the rate at which new descriptions accumulate indicates that these two million are only about 50 percent of the extant species on earth. The increase in new species of birds (8600 known species) has sunk to less than 0.3 percent a year, but in many other classes (for example, Turbellaria with 2500 known species) the rate of increase indicates that undescribed species probably total more than 80 percent. Although only about half of the existing kinds of animals have been described, 80 percent of the families, 95 percent of the orders, and nearly all of the animal classes are presumably already known. Therefore a new phylum should be rare indeed.

* * *

The first day it was pretty frightening for me. I saw one of them, with his sleek face and all, and I could accept that, but then another one came into the room to

give me an injection, and he looked just like the first one. Twins, I thought, my doctors are twins. But then a third and a fourth and a fifth arrived. The same face, the very same fucking face. Imagine my chagrin, me with my blob of a nose, with my uneven teeth, with my eyebrows that meet in the middle, with my fleshy pockmarked cheeks, lying there beneath this convocation of the perfect. Let me tell you I felt out of place. I was never touchy about my looks before—I mean, it's an imperfect world, we all have our flaws—but these bastards *didn't* have flaws, and that was a hard acceptance for me to relate to. I thought I was being clever: I said, You're all multiples of the same gene-pattern, right? Modern advances in medicine have made possible an infinite reduplication of genetic information and the five of you belong to one clone, isn't that it? And several of them answered, No, this is not the case, we are in fact wholly unrelated but within the last meta-week we have independently decided to standardize our appearance according to the presently favored model. And then three or four more of them came into my room to get a look at me.

* *

In the beginning I kept telling myself: *In the country of the beautiful the ugly man is king.*

*

Louisiana was the first one with whom I had a sexual liaison. We often went to public copulatoria. She was easy to arouse and quite passionate although her friend Calpurnia informed me some months later that Louisiana takes orgasm-inducing drugs before copulating with me. I asked Calpurnia why and she became embarrassed. Dismayed, I bared my body to her and threw myself on top of her. Yes, she cried, rape me, violate me!

Calpurnia's vigorous spasms astonished me. The following morning Louisiana asked me if I had noticed Calpurnia swallowing a small purple spansule prior to our intercourse. Calpurnia's face is identical to Louisiana's but her breasts are farther apart. I have also had sexual relations with Helena, Amniota, Drusilla, Florinda, and Vibrissa. Before each episode of copulation I ask them their names so that there will be no mistakes.

* *

At twilight they programmed an hour of red and green rainfall and I queried Senator Mandragore about the means by which I had been brought to this era. Was it by bodily transportation through time? That is, the physical lifting of my very self out of *then* and into *now*? Or was my body dead and kept on deposit in a freezer-vault until these people resuscitated and refurbished it? Am I, perhaps, a total genetic reconstruct fashioned from a few fragments of ancient somatic tissue found in a baroque urn? Possibly I am only a simulated and stylized interpretation of twentieth-century man produced by a computer under intelligent and sympathetic guidance. How was it done, Senator? How was it done? The rain ceased. Leaving elegant puddles of blurred hue in the puddle-places.

*

Walking with Louisiana on my arm down Venus Avenue I imagined that I saw another man with a face like mine. It was the merest flash: a dark visage, thick heavy brows, stubble on the cheeks, the head thrust belligerently forward between the massive shoulders. But he was gone, turning a sudden corner, before I could get a good look. Louisiana suggested I was overindulging in hallucinogens. We went to an underwater theater and

she swam below me like a golden fish, revolving lights glinting off the upturned globes of her rump.

* *

This is a demonstration of augmented mental capacity said Vibrissa. I wish to show you what the extent of human potentiality can be. Read me any passage of Shakespeare of your own choice and I will repeat it verbatim and then offer you textural analysis. Shall we try this? Very well I said and delicately put my fingernail to the Shakespeare cube and the words formed and I said out loud, What man dare, I dare: Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear, the arm'd rhinoceros, or the hyrcan tiger, Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves Shall never tremble. Vibrissa instantly recited the lines to me without error and interpreted them in terms of the poet's penis-envy, offering me footnotes from Seneca and Strindberg. I was quite impressed. But then I was never what you might call an intellectual.

* *

On the day of the snow-gliding events I distinctly and beyond any possibilities of ambiguity or misapprehension saw two separate individuals who resembled me. Are they importing more of my kind for their amusement? If they are I will be resentful. I cherish my unique status.

* * *

I told Dr. Habakkuk that I wished to apply for transformation to the facial norm of society. Do it, I said, the transplant thing or the genetic manipulation or however you manage it. I want to be golden-haired and have blue eyes and regular features. I want to look like you. Dr.

Habakkuk smiled genially and shook his youthful golden head. No, he told me. Forgive us, but we like you as you are.



Sometimes I dream of my life as it was in the former days. I think of automobiles and pastrami and tax returns and marigolds and pimples and mortgages and the gross national product. Also I indulge in recollections of my childhood my parents my wife my dentist my younger daughter my desk my toothbrush my dog my umbrella my favorite brand of beer my wristwatch my answering service my neighbors my phonograph my ocarina. All of these things are gone. Grinding my flesh against that of Drusilla in the copulatorium I wonder if she could be one of my descendants. I must have descendants somewhere in this civilization, and why not she? She asks me to perform an act of oral perversion with her and I explain that I couldn't possibly engage in such stuff with my own great-grandchild.



I think I remain quite calm at most times considering the extraordinary nature of the stress that this experience has imposed on me. I am still self-conscious about my appearance but I pretend otherwise. Often I go naked just as they do. If they dislike bodily hair or disproportionate limbs, let them look away.



Occasionally I belch or scratch under my arms or do other primitive things to remind them that I am the authentic man from antiquity. For now there can be no doubt

that I have my imitators. There are at least five. Calpurnia denies this but I am no fool.

* *

Dr. Habakkuk revealed that he was going to take a holiday in the Carpathians and would not return until the 14th of June-surrogate. In the meantime Dr. Clasp would minister to my needs. Dr. Clasp entered my suite and I remarked on his startling resemblance to Dr. Habakkuk. He asked, What would you like? and I told him I wanted him to operate on me so that I looked like everybody else. I am tired of appearing bestial and primordial, I said. To my surprise Dr. Clasp smiled warmly and told me that he'd arrange for the transformation at once, since it violated his principles to allow any organism needlessly to suffer. I was taken to the operating room and given a sour-tasting anesthetic. Seemingly without the passing of time I awakened and was wheeled into a dome of mirrors to behold myself. Even as I had requested they had redone me into one of them, blond-haired, blue-eyed, with a slim agile body and a splendidly symmetrical face. Dr. Clasp came in after a while and we stood side by side: we might have been twins. How do you like it? he asked. Tears brimmed in my eyes and I said that this was the most wonderful moment of my life. Dr. Clasp pummeled my shoulder jovially and said, You know, I am not Dr. Clasp at all, I am really Dr. Habakkuk and I never went to the Carpathians. This entire episode has been a facet of our analysis of your pattern of responses.

* * *

Louisiana was astonished by my changed appearance. Are you truly he? she kept asking Are you truly he? I'll prove it I said and mounted her with my old prehistoric

zeal, snorting and gnawing her breasts. But she shook me free with a deft flip of her pelvis and rushed from the chamber. You'll never see me again she shouted but I merely shrugged and called after her, So what I can see lots of others just like you. I never saw her again.

*

Table 1. Composition of isocaloric diet.

<i>Substance</i>	<i>Composition (%)</i>
Barley meal	70.0
Fine Millars Offal	20.0
Extracted soya bean meal	7.5
Salt	0.5
Ground limestone	0.5
Sterilized bone meal	1.0
"Eves" No. 32 (totally digestible)	0.25

*

Plausible attitudes upon discovering that one has been ripped from one's proper cultural matrix:

- a) Fear
- b) Indignation
- c) Incredulity
- d) Uncertainty
- e) Aggressive hostility
- f) Withdrawal
- g) Compulsive masturbation
- h) Cool acceptance
- i) Suspicion
- j) None of these

* * *

So now they have all changed themselves again to the new standard model. It happened gradually over a pe-

riod of months but the transition is at last complete. Their heavy brows, their pockmarked cheeks, their hairy chests. It is the latest thing. I make my way through the crowded streets and wherever I turn I see faces that mirror my own lopsidedness. Only I am not lopsided myself any more, of course. I am symmetrical and flawless, and I am the only one. I cannot find Dr. Habakkuk and Dr. Clasp is in the Pyrenees; Senator Mandragore was defeated in the primary. So I must remain beautiful. Walking among them. They are all alike. Thick lips uneven teeth noses like blobs. How I despise them! I the only golden one. And all of them mocking me by their metamorphosis. All of them. Mocking me. Meee.

*The galaxy is full of dishonorable men—
everybody's got to make a living . . .*

THE CYBERNETIC TABERNACLE JOB

Ron Goulart

Decker unplugged the pianist and threw him clear across the silver-walled room. A metal-shaded lamp toppled over onto a loveseat when the android hit. The upright tin piano switched to automatic and resumed playing.

The lizard man receptionist said, "Next question. Color of eyes?"

"I'm in a hurry." Decker was a large, muscular man in his early thirties. "I'd prefer to avoid the formalities."

The receptionist said, "The Aluminium Madam isn't your usual whorehouse, sir. We believe in a complete prelim questioning, since that results in more satisfaction for everyone. Violence doesn't impress us."

Decker grimaced, then answered, "Blue."

"Which blue. Bluebell blue, cornflower blue, blue sky blue?"

Decker stepped over the piano playing robot and grabbed up the receptionist. "Ice blue."

The green-toned lizard man twisted and wrote on the application form on his aluminum desk. "Ice blue. Color of hair?"

Decker tightened his grip on the green lizard man's lapels. "Look, I'm not a customer. I'm trying to find a friend of mine named Palma. I just arrived on your

planet, on Barafunda, and they told me at Palma's apartment house he was over here."

The receptionist licked his green lips. "I'm afraid I can't tell you if he's here, sir."

Decker dropped the lizard back in his bronze chair. He strode around the parlor of the bordello. He kicked the piano, asking, "Doesn't this play anything but ragtime?"

"It also plays waltzes, gavottes, military marches and folk melodies. What would you like to hear?"

"I'd like to hear nothing," he replied. "Look, my name is Decker. I'm not known for patience."

"Not *the* Decker? Interplanetary rogue and thief? What brings you to the Novato Territory, sir?"

"A job," answered Decker. "Now where's Palma?"

The lizard man punched keys on an iron filing box next to his desk. "Theft must be a fascinating profession, especially on a galactic scale. Let's see now. Yes, Palma is up on Floor six."

"Can you get him down here or shall I go up and fetch him?"

"I think," said the lizard man, "it would be best if I buzzed for him. We can't have you getting impatient up there, too."

"Okay." Decker let his wide shoulders slump slightly and he sat on the edge of a loveseat. He'd come out to this planet to earn a half million dollars. That kind of money still made him anxious. It was a bad habit and Decker told himself he'd have to shake it.

Palma bent straight-legged and turned up the temperature of his thermal rug. He then moved around on the rug in a slow skating motion, bare-footed. "I can still touch my toes a hundred times in a row," he told Decker. "That's what good shape I'm in."

Decker paced in giant steps across Palma's living room. He frowned at the plump curly-haired man. "This new job doesn't call for a toe toucher, Palma." He sat

down impatiently in a leather morris chair. "Ouch." He jumped back up and reached under the chair cushion, grabbing out a small microphone. "What's this?"

"Law Office mike," replied the plump Palma, touching his toes once.

"I thought you said we could talk here?"

"We can, Decker. Look underneath the Law Office mike."

Decker turned the device over. "A counter-bug?"

"Right, so feel free to talk," said Palma. "What's the new job, Decker? We haven't worked together since the Enormous Commando job on Murdstone. Another statue maybe?"

"No," replied Decker. "This one has religious overtones."

Palma blinked and came sliding suddenly across the rug. He grabbed the listening device out of Decker's big hand. "Look. Those crafty LO bastards have put an anti-bug on my counter-bug. We'll fix that." He fished a small magnetized silver-colored disk out of the pocket of his net jumpsuit and attached it to the bugging devices. "This anti-anti-bug should negate the whole works."

"You sure you've got all the law bugs spotted?"

"I'm sure." Palma cracked his plump toes. "The job?"

"What do you know about the Mechanistic Brotherhood?"

"They're one of the prominent religious orders here in the Novato Territory. Believers in the divinity of machinery. Their giant temple near Lake Novato is protected by every security device known to man. What about them?"

"I'm going to steal something out of the temple."

"That's sacrilege, isn't it?"

"It'll pay half a million dollars."

"Well, a worthwhile sacrilege."

Decker said, "I have a client back on the planet Bar-num who'll pay a half million for an object called the Verdadero Brickbat."

Palma, who was still holding the composite of listening

and anti-listening devices, dropped it. "Impossible," he said finally. "That's the Mechanistic Brotherhood's most prized relic. Do you know what it is?"

"A brick."

"Not any brick, Decker. This is the brick that felled their founder, some three hundred years ago. During a street riot somebody chucked the brick at Verdadero and knocked him senseless. There's hundreds of years of religious tradition connected with the Verdadero Brickbat."

"There's a half million connected with it, too."

"Who's willing to pay that kind of dough anyway?"

"The same collector who bought the Enormous Commando and the invisible nickel off us," said Decker. "He's a guy who loves to acquire rare one-of-a-kind things."

Palma asked, "Suppose we do get the brickbat. How you going to get it off Barafunda and back to Barnum?"

Impatiently Decker said, "My customer has made arrangements with a bootleg matter transmitter here in the territory. Soon as we have the brick we take it there and it gets sent to him. Then he sends us the half million in cash and it gets split up."

"The Verdadero Brickbat, huh?"

"How can we get inside the temple to case it?"

Palma shook his curly head. "You can't. Not unless you were a convert. They don't allow tourists," he said. "But, Decker, those brothers have got anti-burglary devices and mean black dogs and android police hounds programmed to go straight for your throat. They've got an outer fence of laser beams and behind that an old-fashioned electric fence and then a stone wall with broken glass on top. You cross all that and you still have to face a moat filled with quicklime. Everything runs on their own generators, too."

Decker nodded. "Where exactly is the brickbat kept?"

"I'm not sure," said Palma.

Decker said, "We'll have to recruit an esper and a telek."

"A telekinetic heist expert?" Palma brightened, then

shook his head. "But even a telek has to get inside there at least once, Decker. You know they can't move anything they haven't seen in person at least once."

"That's why we need the esper."

Palma glided, flatfooted, around on the warm rug for a moment. "I don't know, Decker. Things are particularly tight on this planet now, especially here in Novato Territory. You know there's a big anti-crime convention going on at the Novato Lakeshore Hotel. You heard about that. Even your old nemesis Lt. Seams of the Barnum Law Office is out here for that. And that Mrs. Cardwell, the new president of the Anti-Crime Federation of the Barnum Planets. Neither one of them is fond of you, especially after you took the Enormous Commando."

Decker nodded again and held up two fingers. He touched them in sequence, impatiently. "A telek and an esper. Quick."

Lt. Seams was listening to his elbow. The elbow was hollow and filled with miniature surveillance relay equipment. He listened in on a group of anarchists for awhile, then watched a pornographic lizard film being shown down in the shacktown near the lake. Even when on another planet and conventioning, Seams liked to keep up with the underworld. He tuned in another report and then became so excited he thwacked himself in the nose with his false vinyl elbow. "Hey," he said aloud. "Decker's on Barafunda." Seams was a heavy shorthaired man of thirty-seven and he was sitting now at a table in the local Law Office employees' cafeteria.

A plainclotheswoman next to him stopped eating and asked, "Did you hurt your nose, Lt. Seams?"

"Decker," repeated the policeman. "Right here in Novato Territory."

Across the cafeteria table a second plainclotheswoman, younger and prettier, a blonde, asked, "You mean Decker the clever cracksman and elusive interplanetary thief?"

Lt. Seams put his elbow down and noticed the girl. "That Decker, yes."

"Is it true the Enormous Commando he stole weighed fifteen tons?"

"No, eleven tons."

"Still, that's pretty enormous," said the pretty blonde policewoman.

Lt. Seams massaged his chin. "He must be here to pull a job. What's he going to swipe?" Seams had been eating a soyloaf sandwich by himself until the news that the anti-bug in Palma's apartment had picked up a mention of Decker before being blocked.

The blonde suggested, "Something small."

Seams frowned over at her. "Why do you think so?"

"That's what I'd do," she replied. "I mean, he just recently stole something weighing fifteen tons and he figures you'll expect him to steal something else large. So while the Law Office is standing around guarding all the fifteen ton objects of value in Novato Territory, Decker sneaks in and snatches something teeny. I would."

The other policewoman said, "Janey specializes in thinking like a criminal, Lt. Seams. Your nose is puffing up."

"It always does when I'm thinking."

Janey, the pretty blonde policewoman, said, "You're lucky you're here in our territory, Lt. Seams. We have the best crime labs and surveillance materials on the whole planet. You'll be able to scrutinize Decker's every move."

Seams snorted. "Not Decker. I've long since tried every kind of gadget on him."

He shifted his bulk on the cafeteria bench. "Miss," he observed to the blonde, "what I really need is a wild talent. Yes, exactly. Do you people have any precogs with the Law Office here?"

"Seers, you mean?"

"Guys who can look into the future," said Lt. Seams. "I think it's time to try one on Decker."

Janey said, "We have one precog, but he's home all this week with a bad headache. Oh, but we have a very nice black man. He goes into trances."

"Trances?"

The pretty Janey closed her eyes and put her hands stiff at her sides. "Like this, you know, and then he has visions. He's rated 87% accurate. His name is Sabu Mac-Quarrie."

"Get him," Seams said.

The pale brown lizard man flipped his tail over the side of the slow moving power boat and let it trail in the bright afternoon waters of the lake. "My, I don't know," he sighed to Decker.

Decker was watching the many-towered Mechanistic Brotherhood temple on the far side of the small lake. Its fences and metal dogs flickered harshly in the sunlight. Decker turned his narrowed eyes toward Palma, who was dozing at the steering keyboard. "This is the best telek you can get me?"

"It's the off season," said Palma, yawning. "The anti-crime convention has scared a lot of people off." He pointed at the sprawling glass and metal shore hotel that they were passing.

Decker made a fist of one of his big hands and tapped the lizard man's knee. "Are you on this job or not, Yard?"

The fourth passenger in the rented pleasure boat was a fat bearded man. He said now, "Yard is scared."

Yard pulled his dripping tail back into the boat. "No, it's not cowardice, Mercer. What bothers me is the religious implications." He stroked a scaley hand along his tail. "Telekinetic power, this special ability to will an object to move from one spot to another, is a gift. There's something mystical about it all."

"I'm offering you 10% of the take," put in Decker, impatient.

"Oh, very well. I'm in, I guess."

Mercer said, "Ask him to tell you about the governor's silverware."

Yard looked at his brown feet. "I dropped it, is all."

"Dropped it?" said Decker.

"He was teleporting a chest of silver we'd spotted at the governor's daughter's wedding reception," said the bearded Mercer. "Somewhere between the hotel there and our rendezvous spot Yard lost contact. So the silverware popped up, materialized, someplace else. Fortunately I was able to get an extrasensory hunch and located it under the floorboards at a homosexual roller-skating rink fifteen miles from here. I had to drag him there to look at it again before he could teleport it."

"I can't move anything I don't see first. So I know where it's sitting exactly," said Yard.

Decker nodded negatively at Palma. "This job is starting to smell sour."

"Yard had that screwup over two years ago," Palma assured him.

Yard said, "I really must have a look at the brick first."

Decker pointed at Mercer. "Find out exactly where they keep the brickbat."

Mercer closed his small puffed eyes. "I'm concentrating. There, I see it. Nope, wrong brick. That's the fireplace in the vestry. Wait now, I'm seeing the right brick. Yes, it's in a glass box with gold encrusted doors. A tabernacle it's in. Underneath there's a silver plaque reading *Verdadero Brickbat*. I bet that little plaque itself is worth a few thousand."

"I won't be able to get the brickbat and the plaque at the same time," said the brown lizard man. "Telekinetic pilfering has specific and rigid rules. One object at a time."

Decker hit Yard once more on the knee. "We don't want the plaque."

Palma asked Mercer, "What room do you see that tabernacle in?"

"Just a second, I'm close up on the brickbat still. I'll pull back for a long shot. Over the door it says 'Shrine of the Cybernetic Tabernacle. Reserved for New Converts and Miracle Witnesses Only.'"

Infinity Three

Decker told Yard, "Okay, this afternoon you and Palma go to the temple and tell the brothers you witnessed a miracle."

The lizard man rubbed his knee. "I hate to tell lies."

"What kind of miracle do we need?" Decker asked Palma.

"Something involving the divinity of machines," said the chubby man at the steering mechanism.

Decker said to Yard, "Tell them you couldn't walk until yesterday. Then when you were sitting in your kitchen you accidentally bumped into the refrigerator and it made a very strange sound. The next thing you knew you were up and walking."

Mercer opened his tiny eyes. "You've got part of the Verdadero legend mixed in there, Decker. Verdadero himself was cured of his stammer by his refrigerator."

"Stammering isn't the same as not walking," said Decker.

Yard said, "How about instead I was hungry and starving and a candy dispensing machine in a monorail station stopped me and gave me a pound of peanut brittle and saved my life?"

"That's too silly," said Palma.

"I like peanut brittle," said Yard. "I ought to be able to pick my own miracle."

Decker cut in, "Yard, you were crippled and your refrigerator cured you." He hit the lizard man again on the knee.

Yard said, "I don't know if I can walk now." He stood, swaying, and wiggled his leg. "I guess I'm okay."

"After you and Yard come out of the temple, Palma," said Decker, "go get a replica of the brickbat made and meet me down by the shore here at sundown."

"How soon before we get our money?" asked Mercer.

Decker gave them a shacktown address. "Be there at midnight and you'll get your cut," he told them.

Lt. Seams nudged the rigid black man with his vinyl elbow. "What is he now, asleep or in a trance?"

Janey, the lovely blonde policewoman, replied, "Sabu MacQuarrie informed me there's a fine line between napping and the trance state."

"Which side of the line is he on now?"

"I'd guess this is a trance, lieutenant. You'd best take notes from this point on."

"He would have to go into his trance on top of my temporary desk." Seams slid a hand gingerly under the stiff MacQuarrie, searching for a memo pad. His hand came out with a desk calendar. The Barnum law officer snorted, flung the calendar aside and reached under again.

"I see, I see," murmured MacQuarrie.

"Wait till I get the damn notebook." This time Seams had it. Flipping to a blank page, he tugged an electric pencil from his pocket. "Okay, now."

"I see a splendid hotel."

"Splendid hotel. Got that."

"I see a splendid hotel."

"Yes, I got that."

"It is . . . it is the . . . Novato Lakeshore Hotel."

"The hotel where we're having the anti-crime convention?"

"I see an anti-crime convention in progress."

"Even Decker wouldn't dare try a caper at the hotel during our convention."

"I see a man. A big, devil-may-care, hell-for-leather sort of roguish man."

"Sounds like Decker," observed the lovely blonde Janey.

"This man is called . . . Decker. I see him stroll into the hotel. In his mind there is but a single thought."

"What thought?" demanded Lt. Seams.

"Theft."

"What's he going to try for?"

"I see . . ." Sabu MacQuarrie's eyes snapped open and he sat up. "Well, that was a nice trance." He yawned. "I trust I've been of service, sir."

"What's Decker going to swipe at the hotel?"

"Who?"

Janey put in, "He doesn't even remember what he views while in the trance, lieutenant."

"Go back under then and get a look at what Decker's stealing."

The black man smiled. "I only have one trance a day as a rule. This has been that trance."

"Okay, never mind," grumbled Seams. "We know Decker is going to hit during the convention. Sometime during the next two days. If your prognostication is worth a damn."

"I am 89% accurate, sir."

"Isn't it 87%?" asked Janey.

"New figures came in the beginning of this week," replied the seer, "and I went up two percentage points."

"Enough," said Lt. Seams. "I have to alert everybody. I'm going to have so many men waiting for Decker he won't be able to come within ten feet of that damn hotel without getting nabbed."

"What hotel?" asked MacQuarrie.

Decker, hidden away among the spikey shore bushes, unwrapped the fake brick. He carefully held the brick out toward Yard. "Okay, get yourself ready."

The lizard man frowned. "That doesn't look much like the brick we saw this afternoon."

Decker turned and gestured, impatiently, through the twilight at the chubby Palma. "You were there. I told you to get an authentic fake."

Palma, flat on his stomach on the sandy ground, replied, "I only had two hours to get it done, Decker, and besides the art forger I used never did a brick before."

Yard reached out and touched the brick with one scaley hand. "Perhaps I'm being finicky."

Decker gave a non-committal grunt. The three of them were crouched in the darkening day, across the lake from the temple of the Mechanistic Brotherhood and up the shore from the convention hotel. "Okay, Yard. You

concentrate and materialize this fake brick into the tabernacle and the real one out."

"This false brick in and the authentic Verdadero Brickbat out? Sounds simple enough." Yard turned away from Decker and grinned at Palma. "This should take, oh, about ten seconds. Your brick will get substituted for the real one and nobody will be the wiser. Probably."

"Probably?" echoed Decker.

"Here goes," said the lizard man.

Decker's big flat hand felt suddenly lighter. He saw the fake relic was gone. "Good," he said.

With brownish fists clenched Yard said, "And here comes the real brickbat."

All three of them were watching Decker's empty hand.

After a moment more Palma shifted position, saying, "Must be a good ten seconds by now."

Decker stood straight up in the oncoming darkness and made his open hand into an enormous fist. "It's more like a goddamn minute."

Yard ran his tongue along his lips. "Put your hand out again and I'll try to hit it."

Decker grabbed the lizard man up out of the protective scrub. "Where's the Verdadero Brickbat?"

"Well, it's not here."

Decker made an impatient noise.

"Nor is it any longer there."

Palma asked, "Not in the tabernacle. How do you know?"

Yard touched his sternum. "I have a feeling is all."

Decker said, "Where do you feel it is then?"

Yard shrugged. "I don't get those kind of feelings, Decker. For those kind of feelings you need Mercer again."

Decker gripped the lizard man once again. "You better not be trying to sell me out."

Yard's tongue flickered in his half open mouth and he swallowed hard. "I know better," he said. "Anyway, I wouldn't know how to fence a brick."

Letting him go, Decker said to Palma, "Take Yard with you and go see Mercer. Find out where the brickbat is. Call me in two hours and we'll meet. Good night." He made a final impatient gesture and strode off into the new night.

Mrs. Cardwell was a small plump woman of eighty. She passed Lt. Seams a tray of soy crackers and near-cheese. "I want to whisper something in your ear," she said softly. "Don't react too violently, Lt. Seams, and spoil our cocktail party here in the lovely grand ballroom of the Navato Lakeshore Hotel."

The lieutenant snorted and rubbed at his pseudo-elbow. "What?" Beyond the lady president of the Anti-Crime Federation's head shone the darkening waters of the lake.

The old law enforcement expert took hold of Seams' ear and pulled his head nearer to hers. "I don't want any of our six hundred guests to hear. There's a poor murdered colored man behind that sofa over there."

"That's Sabu MacQuarrie."

"Ah, then you're already on top of the case."

"He's working for me, Mrs. Cardwell," said Seams.

"He's only in a trance."

Mrs. Cardwell smiled, still holding the lieutenant's ear. "I'm pleased to see you've finally taken my advice about trying some of the more unconventional methods of crime control."

Seams said, "Now I'll tell you something. Decker is on this planet and in this territory."

Mrs. Cardwell let go. "Decker?"

"Yes. According to MacQuarrie, Decker is planning a heist at this very hotel."

"He's audacious enough," admitted Mrs. Cardwell. "What's the rascal after?"

"My seer hasn't come up with that information as yet. I decided to give him a sleeping potion and make him try for another trance," explained Lt. Seams. "As you

noted earlier there are six hundred guests here tonight instead of the invited five hundred."

"The usual gate crashers."

"No, a hundred of them are crack plainclothesmen and plainclotheswomen," said Seams with a pleased snort. "I've got another hundred crack police operatives spread throughout this place." His elbow suddenly gave off a low hum. "Excuse me, Mrs. Cardwell." Seams unfastened his cuff seam, rolled up his shirt sleeve and his tunic sleeve. He opened his elbow and took out his communication unit. "Lt. Seams here." After listening for a moment he growled and hung up. "Decker has struck at the temple of the Mechanistic Brotherhood."

"Are you certain?"

"They have just noticed that a spurious brick has been substituted for a priceless relic known as the Verdadero Brickbat."

Mrs. Cardwell nodded. "Yes, only Decker would attempt that."

"I'll round up my two hundred operatives and take them across to the temple at once," he said. "This is the last time I listen to a seer."

"Shall I let the poor man go on sleeping?" called Mrs. Cardwell.

Lt. Seams was already out of hearing range.

Decker didn't like the restaurant. "Why'd you pick this place?" he asked, taking a seat opposite Palma.

"I like the ambiance," replied the dark chubby man.

A light rain began to fall from the cloudy ceiling and Decker covered his head with a large menu. "Weather Bureau Cafe," he said disdainfully.

"Wait until a thunderstorm." Palma grinned up into the gentle rain. "They have one every hour, right after the sandstorm."

"We won't be here in an hour," said Decker. Rain skittered off the slick menu on down onto his wide shoulders. "Did you locate Mercer again?"

Palma said, "Yes. Now the rain will slacken and we'll have a lovely rainbow."

"What did Mercer say?" Decker lowered his menu as the rain ceased.

"He located the brick, using all his extrasensory abilities," said Palma.

"Where is the damn thing?"

Palma was watching daisies and marigolds sprout up out of the floor of the restaurant. "Maybe we ought to forget it."

"Where?"

"Well, at the lakeshore Hotel. On the sixth floor."

"Does Mercer see the exact location?"

Palma backed in his chair and plucked an artificial daisy. "Don't yell out loud when I tell you."

"I don't yell out loud."

"It's under Mrs. Cardwell's bed."

"What?"

"See, you yelled out loud."

"How'd the Verdadero Brickbat get under her bed?"

"I asked Yard that question," said Palma.

"He says while we were crouching in the brush along the shore and chatting about the anti-crime convention he grew nervous and distraught. Which is why he couldn't get the brick all the way teleported to us."

"I noticed that," cut in Decker. "So he was thinking about Mrs. Cardwell and the brick ended up there."

"He can't explain it, but every once in awhile something he's swiping goes astray. Like the governor's silverware."

Decker turned up his collar against the hurricane now blowing through the cafe. "We know where the brick is again. We'll get Yard to teleport it out."

"He says he can't. Unless he sees it where it lies."

"By the time I smuggle that lizard in to get a look under her bed I can steal the brick myself twice." Decker grew thoughtful. The wind carried his menu away and it went tumbling and flapping across the domed room and came to rest in a pool of rainwater next to a table where

three men and a plump redhaired woman were seated. "Who's that guy with the little beard?"

Palma turned. "Harry 'Thrill Kill' Arneson."

"Isn't he doing ten years in that prison satellite that orbits Murdstone?"

"He escaped."

"What's he doing here?"

"Promoting a book he wrote entitled 'I Escaped From That Prison Satellite That Orbits Murdstone.' He's been autographing copies and making personal appearances in all the territories," explained the chubby Palma. "He's even going to give a speech tomorrow afternoon at the anti-crime convention."

"What would you say Harry 'Thrill Kill' Arneson weighs?"

"One sixty or thereabouts."

"Can Yard lift that much weight telekinetically?"

"If he isn't nervous," said Palma. "There's no weight limit."

Decker nodded. "Kidnap Arneson. Within the next hour or so."

"Okay," said Palma.

"Then hire me an impostor, a shape-changer if possible. Who's available?"

"I can get Anmar."

"No, he's too addled. He's never sure who he is in the first place."

"I hear Eli Goss is in town. He's a deserter from the Chameleon Corps."

"Goss should do," said Decker. "Hire him. Get him to my hotel before ten tonight." Decker stood up from the table.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"Yes, but indoors." Decker walked impatiently out of the place.

The elevator clock struck eleven as Decker, wearing a blond wig and tinted contact lenses and carrying a black satchel, escorted the spurious Harry Arneson onto the

sixth floor of the Lakeshore Hotel. The noryl plastic wall of the corridor showed the night dark lake speckled with the lights of the few last police launches heading for the temple of the Mechanistic Brotherhood.

At the door of Mrs. Cardwell's suite Eli Goss, now an accurate facsimile of the bearded Arneson, stopped and tapped three times.

A view-hole irised open and a wrinkle-bordered eye looked out through the thick door. "Is that Harry 'Thrill Kill' Arneson?" asked Mrs. Cardwell.

"Yes, Ma'am," answered Goss. "I have to see you about my lecture tomorrow."

"Who's that vaguely roguish looking man with you?"

"My trusted physician, Dr. Leiningen."

"Are you ill?"

"Frankly, Ma'm, my claustrophobia has been acting up," Goss told the eyehole. "I'd like to come in and discuss it with you."

"I really don't know."

"This man," said Decker, "shouldn't be standing around hotel corridors at this hour of the night."

"I don't want him collapsing before the talk tomorrow," said Mrs. Cardwell. "Very well, come in." Her eye left the hole and the door rattled, ratcheted and buzzed open.

Goss and Decker moved quickly into the large fur-trimmed living room of the president of the Anti-Crime Federation's suite. "Doc," said Goss, "this room isn't very big, is it?"

"Appears to be a standard size fur-trimmed luxury hotel living room to me, Harry," said Decker, quickly surveying every part of the room.

"Really? Then I must be having one of my spells." Goss made a broken whooping sound and tumbled to the floor.

"What's wrong?" Mrs. Cardwell jumped backward.

"One of his spells." Decker dropped his satchel and scooped up Goss. "Where's the bedroom?"

Mrs. Cardwell pointed one wrinkled hand toward an orange door. "But I already have a colored man in there."

"This is an emergency," said Decker with impatience. "Can't you ask him to get up for awhile?"

"He's in a trance," explained Mrs. Cardwell. "His name is Sabu MacQuarrie and he's working for Lt. Seams of the Barnum Law Office. When the lieutenant rushed off to investigate a crime across the lake he left poor Mr. MacQuarrie behind. So I brought him up here, with police help."

"Police help?"

"A very lovely plainclotheswoman named Janey something or other. She lent a hand and then volunteered to sit with him until he's over it," said Mrs. Cardwell. "Would you know anything about trances, doctor?"

"As a matter of fact, I did my doctoral thesis on the topic of trances and related stupors." Decker spotted a green rubber sofa and plumped Goss down on it. "We'll leave 'Thrill Kill' here while I examine your Mr. MacQuarrie. Meantime, Mrs. Cardwell, get some hot compresses ready." Decker strode to the orange door and knocked on it briskly. "This is Dr. Leiningen."

"Yes?" said the soft voice of the policewoman.

"My specialty is trances."

Janey opened the orange door, smiling expectantly at Decker. "He's not actually in a trance. Lt. Seams gave him a handful of sleeping tablets."

"Let me be the judge of that, miss."

The pretty blonde Janey offered, "I'll stand by to help you."

Decker wished he had more time in his life schedule for girls like this Janey. He shook his head. "I must be alone for the preliminary examination." Decker took her by one fair arm and eased her out into the living room.

"I have the oddest feeling I've met you before, doctor," the girl said as the door closed on her.

Locking himself in with the unconscious MacQuarrie,

Decker ran to the bedside. He frowned at the rigid black man, then knelt and reached under the bed.

"I see . . . I see," muttered the sleeping MacQuarrie. "I see Decker . . ."

Decker had his big hand over the Verdadero Brickbat. He straightened up and watched the seer.

". . . he is stealing a quantity of gold."

"You're two jobs ahead of me." Decker popped the brick into his satchel and went back into the living room. "I'm afraid we'll have to send for the emergency squad, Mrs. Cardwell."

"For which man?"

"For poor MacQuarrie."

Eli Goss sat up on the rubber sofa. "Where am I?"

"You'd better come to my office with me now, Thrill Kill," Decker said to Goss. "I believe I know what's ailing you."

"Shouldn't I talk to Mrs. Cardwell first?"

"Yes," said the old woman. "He did risk his health to tell me something."

Decker smiled. "I'll send him back to you within the hour."

Mrs. Cardwell touched her bosom. "Conventions always disorient me."

Decker helped Goss to his feet. "Stand by for the emergency squad, Mrs. Cardwell."

The lovely Janey crossed to the suite door. "I'm happy to have met you, doctor. Though I can't help thinking I've met you before. Perhaps we'll see each other again."

Decker nodded impatiently and he and Goss stepped out into the corridor.

The smell of lake scum was strong in the basement shack. "I didn't expect a thermal rug down here," said Palma, starting to take off his shoes.

Decker nudged him ahead. "Go on through the damn secret panel."

Behind a ramshackle section of the shanty wall was a

small clean room with a large illegal matter transmitter its only piece of furniture. Bent beside it was an old woman in a feather dress. "Your client, Mr.—"

"Keep his name out of this," Decker told her. He held the black satchel, though he'd shed the blond wig and the contact lenses.

"Mr. you-know-who then," resumed the old woman, "is impatient. It is now a full nine minutes past midnight, Barafunda time, and much later than that on Barnum."

"We had to wait while our shape-changer changed back to himself," explained Palma, nodding in greeting to the fat, small-eyed Mercer and the lizard man Yard, who were already in the concealed room. "He had a few moments when he couldn't remember who he really was, but he's okay now."

Eli Goss, now thin and freckled, came in after Decker and the hidden panel shut at his back. "I'm still guessing about the freckles."

Decker shoved a big hand into the satchel. "Here's the brickbat."

"Bless my soul," said the old woman. "In all my years in the clandestine matter transmitting dodge, in one location and another, I don't believe I've ever handled an authentic religious relic before."

"Send the thing off," ordered Decker.

The old woman took the brick from him and thrust it into a silver lined cubicle in the man-high mechanism. "I've had it all set since well before midnight. There, it's on its way to Mr. you-know-who."

The complex silver and black transmitter quivered through all its height and breadth and the Verdadero Brickbat vanished. Fifteen seconds passed, then thirty. Finally, a full two minutes after the brick had gone, packets of Barnum currency appeared in the three-foot square cubicle and kept tumbling out onto the clean metallic floor of the hidden room until a half million dollars had arrived.

"Okay, I'll divide it," said Decker, stooping.

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The wall of the room crackled and melted away. Lt. Seams, Mrs. Cardwell, the lovely blonde Janey and six armed Law Office troopers were there.

"I just knew I recognized you," said Janey. "Fortunately I remembered soon enough for Mrs. Cardwell and I to trail you here and then summon help, Mr. Decker."

Decker turned to Yard. "Teleport them out of here."

"Who?" asked the nervous lizard man.

Decker started to point and then he felt strange. His stomach gave a spiralling turn and he found he couldn't swallow.

He was standing alone now on a deserted open platform of a monorail station. Next to him was a peanut brittle vending machine. "Not me, them," he said impatiently.

Decker waited on the platform for ten minutes but no one else was teleported there, nor was the money. Lt. Seams must have taken action before anything else could happen.

When an automatic train came drifting in Decker looked once more around the night platform and then stepped aboard. He'd look up another of his contacts and see about getting himself smuggled off-planet.

"Damn it," he said, stepping into the warm fur-trimmed passenger car, "I could have used that half million dollars."

"Beg pardon?" asked the robot conductor.

Decker thought about kicking him, but didn't.

If the universe is insane, who keeps the asylum?

INTER ALIA

Barry N. Malzberg

I

In the asylum, drifting between catatonia and manic fugue (a pattern which has fascinated the psychiatrists although none of them will ever understand it), Handler takes himself to be at a large diplomatic reception in Washington. All of the prominent figures of the government are there plus the leaders of the opposition and a sprinkling of people who he does not recognize; he takes them to be security agents of various kinds, probably the real administrators. In the center of the room floats the alien in his gear, breathing in shallow rasps, gesturing aimlessly at the ceiling in the characteristic patterns of incoordination. Although the alien is the one reason for the reception and its focus, all of the attendees act with unusual circumspection; only one or two at a time go over to talk to the alien while the others, clustering in uncomfortable groups around the walls, shake their heads and discuss routine intrigue. It is hot and dense in the room for all of its expanse and Handler feels himself beginning to weaken from the armpits down. He knows that the reception is important and his attendance unavoidable, but he wishes somehow that he could have spent the evening elsewhere; working on a logistics man-

ual, perhaps, much less with a girl. Nevertheless he knows that his commitment, along with his rank, is stamped upon him by the uniform he is wearing and he is still willing to do the best he can; when a clearing appears around the alien he goes over to him and stands by the tank alone, listening to the mumbles and rasp of the alien's breath, then he raises a hand and says, "I'm honored to meet you. Our division has heard a lot—"

"None of that," the alien says. He speaks, for reasons that the scientists cannot decipher, a good idiomatic English, well inflected and there seems to be more than mere impatience at the moment. "We do not have time for amenities. I am very glad to see you, Colonel; I have heard a lot about you. Now, my one and simple question is will you or will you not turn over those armaments to us? The whole thing, the missiles and the sub-orbitals—"

"I can't say," Handler answers. "I'm not empowered to make decisions of that nature. My rank is too low and anyway it's a civilian decision, not a military one. I can only implement—"

"Nonsense." The alien squeaks and sloshes in its tank; what would happen, Handler idly wonders, if he turned a spigot and let the fluid ooze out? It would ruin the reception of course, little more; the alien has convinced the higher levels that he is invulnerable and the tank merely a convenience. "*You* give me the answer, Colonel Handler and leave the implementation to me. It's your decision, is it yes or no?"

"I can't answer that," Handler says, aware that conversation in the room has quieted and he and the alien seem to be the focus of attention. "I'm only a colonel and at that an intelligence man; surely you know that—"

"All right, Mr. Handler," the alien says. "All right," and turns away from him with an idle splash exposing the smooth and milky ridges of its back; Handler has a mad urge to seize and squeeze but clamps his hands, turns the other way, wills himself to leave . . . but he cannot leave; something has overtaken him. He turns to the

alien, raging, and says, "You have no right to do this to us, absolutely no right." Cursing, he lunges at the tank but before he can touch the alien other bodies have intervened and pull him away. He fights them with steadily decreasing will and finds himself in a corner, staggering, sliding to the floor, some massive apathy sinking through him, but the floor is not so much a flight as an awakening and he lies on the warm, glowing wood, eyes stricken and staring, wishing that he had only had ten seconds more with the alien so that he could have throttled the torment out of it.

II

With the junior psychiatrist for his weekly interview, trying to explain himself (although his case is interesting, it has also been diagnosed as helpless and none of the senior staff has time for him anymore) Handler leans over the desk, grasps the frightened young lieutenant's hand and says, "Don't you understand, the whole thing was a ploy, that was all it was; there never was any alien, there never was any fleet from outer space watching us, it was something which the Enemy did. It was a put-up job, an elaborate act, they wanted us to disarm because we were too strong for them and the simple madness of the trick was what made it effective, the cunning lay in their treating us as if we were demented idiots, not that the other side wasn't the same way but they had the idea first and they made the best of it. Don't you understand how they foxed us? The incredible shrewdness, the deadly simplicity?" Handler sinks back into his chair gasping, his palms damp with the dense sweat of the lieutenant. "You don't understand," he says. "You won't admit it. You took the easy road out. And then what happened?"

"That's very interesting," the lieutenant says. "What do you think of the other side? What else in your life do they remind you of? Is there someone, perhaps someone

you very much loved who hurt you and who you came to think of as the other side? A relative, perhaps, a mother or a father? Was this why you never married?"

"Oh you stupid son of a bitch," Handler says but before he can say more he is lurching into fugue again: so much for that, so much for denouements, so much for his final opinion of the junior psychiatrist. The wood of the desk against his forehead feels cool, cool and elegant, as elegant as the trill of the lying alien's syllables as he lay at the reception like a whore, making procurers of all of them.

III

In his room, the cold hum of the airconditioning sifting through him, Handler, deep in regression, now imagines himself to be on a ship with the aliens, supervising the destruction of the armaments which the government has placed carefully in pre-announced line of fire. There go two old Gemini capsules, knocked from the sky, falling in threads to the Earth, there goes the Omaha installation, torn open by four well-placed super-bombs in the alien's arsenal, there goes the ABM installation hidden in the southern plains of Wyoming, arcing to fire like a matchstick. "Excellent, excellent," the aliens say to one another, bouncing in their tanks (which they insist are only optional equipment; they are amphibians who simply prefer the water). "Now, if you please, you will guide us into your major bombing installations." "I can't stand it," Handler says suddenly, "I can't stand this anymore; you're destroying my life's work, don't you know that? What about the other side, when are you going to knock them out?"

"All in due time," says an alien. "We have other plans for the other side." It giggles in a strangely humanoid fashion, its face crinkling like a mask, and the line of fire goes down again, a thin, flat, arcing knife crisp in the blue of space. Handler can imagine Palermo going, the

whole Palermo Project and this is too much for him, he cannot take it any more, definitely they sent up the wrong man for this duty, his training works the other way. "I can't stand this any more," he says, "I tell you, I can't stand it; you can't do this to us, we've struggled too hard to get this far, we can't give it all up now!" He lunges for the equipment thinking in his madness that perhaps he can turn the craft and blow it out to space (he does not mind being a martyr that way) or at least misdirect the fire. But the aliens are stronger, not to say far more self-possessed and mannered and they club him against the bulkhead with the casual bearlike blows of light weapons, wrapping him in filament that glints silver and suspending him from the ceiling. Astonished, he spins, watching them with distended eyes. "Thank you very much," they say. "You have been most helpful. You have helped to do the job. Now the rest we can finish ourselves. We appreciate. We thank you. We understand the strain on this for you, Colonel. Thank you, thank you." He turns on a spit in the darkness, listening to the rumble of the detonators.

IV

On the lawn for a rare airing, feeling a little bit better today and thank you very much, Handler peeks at the sky, watches the waving of the trees, nods to a passing inmate who might be in his ward. His guards on either side, quiet, deferential, hold their weapons at port arms and look at one another without expression. Occasionally, behind the uncaring Handler, one gestures and the other gestures back but for all the difference that this makes to Handler (or the guards) he might as well be back before the reception, suiting up into his dress blues, his campaign ribbons hard against the fabric, his head cocked to the appropriately military angle as he regards himself in the mirror, Handler and forevermore, on his way to see the alien and call his bluff once and for all,

expose the whole civilian monstrosity for what it is which is certainly nothing that the military cannot penetrate.

It is a very fine place and Handler, in a good period, cannot think of better at the moment. Later, when the fugue begins again he will react differently but that is in the future, two hours in the future at any rate, and by that time the day guards will be off shift and the night attendants, a swifter, more brutal breed, will have taken over.

He was a man of no talent . . . and terrifying power.

TO WALK A CITY'S STREET

Clifford D. Simak

Joe stopped the car.

"You know what to do," he said.

"I walk down the street," said Ernie. "I don't do nothing. I walk until someone tells me it is time to stop. You got the other fellows out there?"

"We have the fellows out there."

"Why couldn't I just go alone?"

"You'd run away," said Joe. "We tried you once before."

"I wouldn't run away again."

"The hell you wouldn't."

"I don't like this job," said Ernie.

"It's a good job. You don't have to do anything. You just walk down the street."

"But you say which street. I don't get a pick of streets."

"What difference does it make what streets you walk?"

"I can't do anything I want, that's the difference that it makes. I can't even walk where I want to walk."

"Where would you want to walk?"

"I don't know," said Ernie. "Any place you weren't watching me. It used to be different. I could do what I wanted."

"You're eating regular now," said Joe. "Drinking regu-

lar, too. You have a place to sleep each night. You got money in your pocket. You have money in the bank."

"It don't seem right," said Ernie.

"Look, what's the matter with you? Don't you want to help people?"

"I ain't got no beef against helping people. But how do I know I help them? I only got your say-so. You and that fellow back in Washington."

"He explained it to you."

"A lot of words. I don't understand what he tells me. I'm not sure I believe what he tells me."

"I don't understand it, either," said Joe, "but I have seen the figures."

"I wouldn't know even if I seen the figures."

"Are you going to get started? Do I have to push you out?"

"No, I'll get out by myself. How far you want I should walk?"

"We'll tell you when to stop."

"And you'll be watching me."

"You're damned right we will," said Joe.

"This ain't a nice part of town. Why do I always have to walk the crummy parts of all these crummy towns?"

"It's your part of town. It's the kind of place you lived before we found you. You wouldn't be happy in any other part of town."

"But I had friends back there where you found me. There was Susie and Jake and Joseph, the Baboon and all the other people. Why can't I ever go back and see my friends?"

"Because you'd talk. You'd shoot off your mouth."

"You don't trust me."

"Should we trust you, Ernie?"

"No, I guess not," said Ernie.

He got out of the car.

"But I was happy, see?" he said.

"Sure, sure," said Joe. "I know."

There was one man sitting at the bar and two sitting at a table in the back. The place reminded Ernie of the place where he and Susie and Joseph, the Baboon, and sometimes Jake and Harry used to spend an evening drinking beer. He climbed up on a stool. He felt comfortable and almost as if he were back in the good old days again.

"Give me a shot," he said to the bartender.

"You got money, friend?"

"Sure, I got money." Ernie laid a dollar on the bar. The bartender got a bottle and poured a drink. Ernie gulped it down. "Another one," he said. The man poured another one.

"You're a new one," the bartender said.

"I ain't been around before," said Ernie.

He got a third drink and sat quietly, sipping it instead of throwing it right down.

"You know what I do?" he asked the bartender.

"Naw, I don't know what you do. You do like all the rest of them. You don't do nothing."

"I cure people."

"Is that so?"

"I walk around and I cure people when I walk."

"Well, great," said the bartender. "I got the beginning of a cold. So cure me."

"You're already cured," said Ernie.

"I don't feel no different than when you walked in here."

"Tomorrow. You'll be all right tomorrow. It takes a little time."

"I ain't going to pay you," said the bartender.

"I don't expect no pay. Other people pay me."

"What other people?"

"Just other people. I don't know who they are."

"They must be nuts."

"They won't let me go home," said Ernie.

"Well, now, ain't that too bad."

"I had a lot of friends. I had Susie and Joseph, the Baboon—"

"Everyone got friends," the bartender said.

"I got an aura. That is what they think."

"You got a what?"

"An aura. That is what they call it."

"Never heard of it. You want another drink?"

"Yeah, give me another one. Then I got to go."

Charley was standing on the sidewalk outside the joint, looking in at him. He didn't want Charley walking in and saying something to him, like get going. It would be embarrassing.

He saw the sign in an upstairs window and darted up the stairs. Jack was across the street and Al just a block or so ahead. They would see him and come running, but maybe he could get to the office before they caught up with him.

The sign on the door said: Lawson & Cramer, Attorneys-at-law. He moved in fast.

"I got to see a lawyer," he told the receptionist.

"Have you an appointment, sir?"

"No, I ain't got no appointment. But I need a lawyer quick. And I got money, see."

He brought out a handful of crumpled bills.

"Mr. Cramer is busy."

"What about the other one? Is he busy, too?"

"There isn't any other lawyer. There used to be—"

"Look, lady, I can't fool around."

The door to the inner office came open and a man stood in it.

"What's going on out here?"

"This gentleman—"

"I ain't no gentleman," said Ernie. "But I need a lawyer."

"All right," said the man. "Come in."

"You're Cramer?"

"Yes, I am."

"You'll help me?"

"I'll try."

The man closed the door and went around the desk and sat down.

"Have a chair," he said. "What is your name?"

"Ernie Foss."

The man wrote on a yellow pad.

"Ernie. That would be Ernest, would it?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"Your address, Mr. Foss."

"I ain't got no address. I just travel around. Once I had an address. I had friends. Susie and Joseph, the Baboon, and—"

"What seems to be the trouble, Mr. Foss?"

"They're holding me."

"Who's holding you?"

"The government. They won't let me go home and they watch me all the time."

"Why do you think they're watching you? What have you done?"

"I ain't done nothing. I got this thing, you see."

"What thing? What have you got?"

"I cure people."

"You can't mean you're a doctor."

"No doctor. I just cure people. I walk around and cure them. I got an aura."

"You have what?"

"An aura."

"I don't understand."

"It's something in me. Something I put out. You got a cold or something?"

"No, I haven't a cold."

"If you had, I'd cure you."

"I tell you what, Mr. Foss. Why don't you go out into the outer office and have a seat. I'll be back with you right away."

As he went out the door, Ernie saw the man reaching for the phone. He didn't wait. He went out the door and

into the hall as fast as he could manage. Jack and Al were waiting for him there.

"That was a stupid thing you did," Joe said to Ernie.

"He didn't believe me," Ernie said. "He was reaching for the phone. He would have called the cops."

"Maybe he did. We thought he might. That's why we got out of there."

"He acted as if he thought maybe I was crazy."

"Why did you do it?"

"I got my rights," said Ernie. "Civil rights. Ain't you ever heard of them?"

"Of course we have. You have your legal rights. It was all explained to you. You're employed. You're a civil servant. You agreed to certain conditions of employment. You're being paid. It's all legal."

"But I don't like it."

"What don't you like about it? Your pay is good. Your work is light. You just do some walking. There aren't many people who are paid for walking."

"If I am paid so good, why do we always stay in crummy hotels like this one?"

"You aren't paying for your room and food," said Joe. "You're on an expense account. We take care of it for you. And we don't stay in good hotels because we aren't dressed for it. We'd look funny in a good hotel. We'd attract attention."

"You guys dress like me," said Ernie. "Why do you dress like me? You even talk like me."

"It's the way we work."

"Yeah, I know. The crummy part of town. And that's all right with me. I never was nowhere but the crummy part of town. But you guys, I can tell. You're used to dressing in white shirts and ties and suits. Suits all cleaned and pressed. And when you aren't with me, you talk different, too, I bet."

"Jack," said Joe, "why don't you and Al go out with

Ernie and have a bite to eat. Charley and me will go later on."

"That's another thing," said Ernie. "You never go into any place or out of any place together. You make it look as if you aren't all together. Would that be so we aren't noticed, too?"

"Oh," said Joe, disgusted, "what difference does it make?"

The three of them left.

"He's getting hard to handle," Charley said.

"Wouldn't you know," said Joe. "There is only one of him and he has to be a moron. Or damn close to one."

"There is no sign of any other?"

Joe shook his head. "Not the last time I talked with Washington. Yesterday, that was. They're doing all they can, of course, but how do you go about it? A statistical approach is the only way. Try to spot an area where there is no disease and once you find it, if you ever find it, try to spot the one who's responsible for it."

"Another one like Ernie."

"Yes, another one like Ernie. You know what? I don't think there is another one like him. He's a freak."

"There might be another freak."

"The odds, I'd think, would be very much against it. And even if there were, what are the chances they'll find him? It was just dumb, blind luck that Ernie was located."

"We're going at this wrong."

"Of course we're going at it wrong. The right way, the scientific way is to find out what makes him the way he is. They tried that, remember? For damn near a year they tried. All sorts of tests and him bitching every minute. Wanting to go back to Susie and Joseph, the Baboon."

"They might have quit just at the time when they might have found . . ."

Joe shook his head. "I don't think so, Charley. I talked

with Rosenmeir. He said it was hopeless. A thing has to get real bad for a man like Rosy to admit that it is hopeless. It took a lot of soul searching to decide to do what we are doing. He couldn't be kept in Washington for further study when there was so little chance of learning anything. They had him. The next logical step was to make some use of him."

"But the country is so big. There are so many cities. So many ghettos. So many pestholes. So much misery. We walk him down a few miles of street each day. We parade him past hospitals and old folks' homes and . . ."

"And don't forget. For every step he takes there may be a dozen people who are made well, another dozen people who won't contract the ailments they would have gotten if it hadn't been for him."

"I don't see how he can help but realize that. We've told him often enough. He should be glad of it, of a chance to help."

Joe said, "I told you. The man's a moron. A little selfish moron."

"You have to see it his way, too, I suppose," said Charley. "We jerked him away from home."

"He never had a home. Sleeping in alleys and flophouses. Panhandling. Doing a little stealing when he had the chance. Shacking up with his Susie when he had a chance. Getting a free meal now and then from some soup kitchen. Raiding garbage cans."

"Maybe he liked it that way."

"Maybe he did. No responsibility. Living day to day, like an animal. But now he has a responsibility—perhaps as great a responsibility, as great an opportunity as any man ever did. There is such a thing as accepting a responsibility."

"In your world, perhaps. In mine. Maybe not in his."

"Damned if I know," said Joe. "He has me beat. He's a complete phoney. This talk of his about a home is all phoney, too. He was only there for four or five years."

"Maybe if we let him stay in one place and brought

people to him, on one pretext or another. Let him sit in a chair, without being noticeable, and parade them past him. Or take him to big meetings and conventions. Let him live it up a little. He might like it better."

"This was all hashed out," said Joe. "We can't be noticed, we can't stand publicity. Christ, can you imagine what might happen if this became public knowledge? He brags about it, of course. He probably was telling them all about it in that dive he stopped off at this afternoon. They paid no attention to him. The lawyer thought that he was crazy. He could stand on a rooftop and yell it to all the world and no one would pay attention. But let one hint come out of Washington . . ."

"I know," said Charley. "I know."

"It's being done," said Joe, "the only way it can be done. We're exposing people to good health, just the way they are exposed to disease. And we're doing it where the need of it is greatest."

"I have a funny feeling, Joe."

"What's that?"

"We may be doing wrong. It sometimes doesn't seem quite right to me."

"You mean going blind. Doing something and not knowing what we are doing. Without understanding it."

"I guess that's it. I don't know. I am all confused. I guess we're helping people."

"Ourselves included. The exposure we are getting to this guy, we should live forever."

"Yes, there's that," said Charley.

They sat silent for a moment. Finally Charley asked, "You got any idea, Joe, when they'll end this tour? It's been going for a month. That's the longest so far. The kids won't know me when I get home if it isn't soon."

"I know," said Joe. "It's tough on a family man like you. Me, it doesn't matter. And I guess it's the same with Al. How's it with Jack? I don't know him well. He's a man who never talks. Not about himself."

"I guess he's got a family somewhere. I don't know

anything about it, just that he has. Look, Joe, would you go for a drink? I have a bottle in my bag. I could go and get it."

"A drink," said Joe, "is not a bad idea."

The telephone rang and Charley, who had started for the door, stopped and turned around.

"It might be for me," he said. "I called home a while ago. Myrt wasn't there. I asked little Charley to have her call. I gave both room numbers, just in case I was here."

Joe picked up the phone and spoke into it. He shook his head at Charley. "It's not Myrt. It's Rosy."

Charley started for the door.

Joe said, "Just a minute, Charley."

He went on listening.

"Rosy," he finally said, "you are sure of this?"

He listened some more. Then he said, "Thanks, Rosy. Thanks an awful lot. You stuck out your neck calling us."

He hung up the phone and sat, staring at the wall.

"What's the matter, Joe? What did Rosy want?"

"He called to warn us. There is a mistake. I don't know how or why. A mistake is all."

"What did we do wrong?"

"Not us. It's Washington."

"You mean about Ernie. His civil rights or something."

"Not his civil rights. Charley, he isn't curing people. He is killing them. He's a carrier."

"We know he is a carrier. Other people carry a disease, but he carries—"

"He carries a disease, too. They don't know what it is."

"But back there in his old neighborhood, he made all the people well. Everywhere he went. That is how they found him. They knew there must be someone or something. They hunted till they—"

"Charley, shut up. Let me tell you. Back in his old neighborhood they're dying like flies. They started a couple of days ago and they still are dying. Healthy people dying. Nothing wrong with them, but they're dying just the same. A whole neighborhood is dying."

"Christ, it can't be, Joe. There must be some mistake . . ."

"No mistake. It's the very people he made well who are dying now."

"But it doesn't make sense."

"Rosy thinks maybe it's a new kind of virus. It kills all the rest of them, all the viruses and bacteria that make people sick. No competition, see? It kills off the competition, so it has each body to itself. Then it settles down to grow and the body is all right, because it doesn't intentionally harm the body, but there comes a time . . ."

"Rosy is just guessing."

"Sure Rosy is just guessing. But it makes sense to hear him tell it."

"If it's true," said Charley, "think of all the people, the millions of people . . ."

"That's what I'm thinking of," said Joe. "Rosy took a chance in calling us. They'll crucify him if they find out about the call."

"They'll find out. There'll be a record of it."

"Maybe none that can be traced to him. He called from a phone booth out in Maryland somewhere. Rosy's scared. He is in it up to his neck, the same as us. He spent as much time with Ernie as we did. He knows as much as we do, maybe more than we do."

"He thinks, spending all that time with Ernie, we might be carriers, too?"

"No, I guess not that. But we know. We might talk. And no one can talk about this. No one will be allowed to talk about this. Can you imagine what would happen, the public reaction . . ."

"Joe, how long did you say Ernie spent in that neighborhood of his?"

"Four or five years."

"That's it, then. That's the time we have. You and I and all the rest of us, maybe have four years, probably less."

"That's right. And if they pick us up, we'll spend those

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years where there won't be any chance of us talking to anyone at all. Someone probably is headed here right now. They have our itinerary."

"Then let's get going, Joe. I know a place. Up north. I can take the family. No one will ever think of looking."

"What if you're a carrier?"

"If I'm a carrier, my family has it now. If I'm not, I want to spend those years—"

"And other people . . ."

"Where I'm headed there aren't many people. We'll be by ourselves."

"Here," said Joe. He took the car keys out of his jacket pocket and tossed them across the room. Charley caught them.

"What about you, Joe?"

"I have to warn the others. And, Charley . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Ditch that car before morning. They'll be looking for you. And when they miss you here, they'll watch your family and your home. Be careful."

"I know. And you, Joe?"

"I'll take care of myself. As soon as I let the others know."

"And Ernie? We can't let him—"

"I'll take care of Ernie, too," said Joe.

Even the most faithful believer can serve a false god . . .

ALTARBOY

Dean R. Koontz

Silver feet dance on a human timpani; unseen players pipe hollowed reeds behind a black velvet curtain . . .

I woke and was not myself. One of them had risen while I dozed, and silver hands clawed relentlessly at the fabric of my mind. They shredded hive layers of memory, worked at tearing the cloth of my personality with a frenzy that was more than human.

I traced the silver hands back to silver wrists and arms, across the smooth metallic sheen of shoulders to a face I recognized. But then I recognize them all. It was a woman whom I had executed some five years ago. Her name, it seemed to me, was Jennifer.

Concentrating on the Shasumi Rules of mental discipline, I rebuilt the hive layers she had destroyed, and I shaped a prong of energy to drive her back into the depths of my id where she belonged. Therein, I made an almost fatal error.

With all of my attention diverted to Jennifer, the others roiled upwards. They came out of the pit, screaming banshees that beat me down and carved footholds in the chasm in order to reach my consciousness and gain control of me. Their sightless silver eyes gleamed; their sealed, bright lips did not move at all as their cacophony increased until it was the thunder of a storm.

Infinity Three

Croaking, I pushed off the bed and fell to my knees on the amber floor. Light flushed upwards as my weight activated the shifting clouds of neon gas below. But these were not the sorts of demons who could be exorcised by light.

I toppled forward and struck the floor with my chin. Blackness burst like the ink sac of a squid. I forced my mind to swim away from the deep darkness; that way lay disaster.

Jennifer had insinuated herself into the upper caves of my mind and was anchoring brittle fingers into the stone walls so that I could not dislodge her. Though her silver face could contain no emotion, I fancied I saw hatred there. Behind her, wailing their agony and their hope of final release, the others came, kicking off the stink of the id pit. They groped their way over the ledge of granite from which they could lever themselves into my consciousness.

I could not concentrate on the Shasumi Rules. The pain was so intense that I had to concentrate all my energies on beating it back. I battled the heat and the needles, the rhythmic waves of agony, until I reached the corridor door. I rose to my knees. The panel slid away at the touch of my fingers. Gagging, I sprawled into the hall where other citizens were on their way to and from their daily duties.

When you are dying, it is most difficult to speak. Still, I managed to gurgle something.

They ran toward me.

In my mind, Jennifer cursed through those immobile silver lips and beat glimmering hands upon the walls of my consciousness in utter frustration. Her hatred was deeper than any id pit.

I passed out.

In the middle of the timpani, hardly visible from the edge of the vast thing, the membrane is decorated with a

tattoo which is no more than a number with two letters after it . . .

When I woke, there were other minds in my own mind, although they were not made of silver. Shadowy images, like puffs of smoke, did battle with Jennifer and the others. Lances of pure energy struck out, blazing across the dome of my perception, striking at the metallic creatures and bringing them to the edge of the pit where they teetered in despair, refusing to accept the fact that they must return to the pit which was their rightful place in the scheme of my mental landscape.

Jennifer cried out in those strange polysyllabic words that made no sense, the words of the silver people. I was deeply moved by the tone of her plea, but there was nothing I could do for her—nothing at all. Unless I was willing to surrender my own personality and allow her free reign of me. Or unless I was willing to die. And no man willingly chooses the grave.

Behind her, others crashed downward into the seething cauldron of the id. Their melancholic protestations faded into silence as the boiling sea accepted them and took them down. But Jennifer held on, slapping at the bolts of blue luminescence which burst around her, scored her shining form with black gashes and made her mental flesh run and bead on the rocky ground at her feet.

"She's a tough one," someone said.

One of the dark smoke creatures moved closer to her, held out its insubstantial hands in her direction, and blasted her with licking tongues of crimson light.

Jennifer erupted into a cascading fall of silver globules and streamed backwards over the brink of the pit, down into the regions that she was meant to inhabit.

"Gone," one of the smoke things said, peering over the rim of the hole, into the dark and lavalike ocean below.

One round, glistening droplet of silver hung above the

pit, whirling in circles, reflecting the eerie mist of the triumphant warriors. Then it fell, like a stone, down. And I slept again.

The tightly stretched skin of the enormous timpani reverberates like the drums of war, like the rush of blood in veins and the roaring tongues of the flames in a furnace . . .

The team of espers brought me up from darkness through shifting spectrums of color, through cities of blues, worlds of greens and yellows, galaxies of oranges and reds, finally into the multi-colored plain on which we exist.

I opened my eyes on a trio of placid, chalky faces. Six huge, pink eyes blinked in unison, regarding me coldly. When they saw I was awake, they turned and crossed my room, went through the onyx panel which slid shut behind them of its own accord.

Consensus Correlator Magnusson rose from the easy chair and crossed to my bed, looked down at me. He is a big man, with shaggy white hair and eyebrows like feathers. "Are you all right?"

I managed to say that I was, though I wasn't. Oh, the silver ones were calmed, but the terror of what had almost happened to me was still fresh, hard on my nerves.

He sat on the edge of the bed. "Perhaps we'll relieve you of your chores as an Executioner," he said.

The terror grew. Rather, I was terrified of two things, now, instead of one. I licked my lips and tried to gain a moment to gather my arguments. "My duty lies with the Consensus," I told him. "I can't accept an opening in the Polled jobs. I was meant to serve the government!"

He looked as fatherly as only a Correlator can. "You can't serve the Consensus if you allow yourself to be controlled by the executed within you."

It was true; I argued against it. "I passed all the tests. I have a mind capable of restraining them. Executioners

are rare! Without me, the schedule of deaths would have to be changed in this city. I account for twenty percent of all Absolute Dissenter deaths in the megalopolis."

"And you have taken three hundred thousand souls in your career." The shaggy eyebrows drew down and all but covered the Correlator's clear blue eyes.

"I have the capacity for twenty times as many!"

"Theoretically."

He said that with such maddeningly complete judgment that I could find no reply.

"This afternoon, there will be a Poll," Magnusson said. "All the cities have been directed to run it. The Sino-Turkish land extension into the Mediterranean is threatening our skimmer shipping. The government will act tomorrow morning according to the dictates of the Consensus."

"Have the Turks been warned?" I asked, sitting up at the mention of crisis. Our lives were dotted like fly-specked windowsills with the marks of one crisis after the other. Yet we were frightened by them and moved, continually, to nationalistic paranoia. Perhaps it was the nightly subliminals the Consensus government had long ago voted into effect to help re-establish patriotism in a people sadly lacking it.

"They say their own Consensus Poll has been run and that their people still insist that the land extension be continued. A peninsula will be built into the sea along a stretch of bedrock that lies at seven fathoms. They have an over-life of some seventeen million along the shores, and their anti-plague computer-docs aren't coping."

"War," I said, tasting the word, finding it slick and greased but not unpleasant.

"The Consensus government," Magnusson said, "has provided only two choices for the Poll, since the matter is much too crucial for a vague series of intermediate steps. First, there is a recommendation that the Sino-Turkish coalition be permitted to construct the land extension, but that they be made the target of an exten-

sive trade embargo. Secondly, there is a resolution that we declare war on the Turks and force an end to the extension and thus maintain sea access to our colonies in Asia Minor."

"The second," I said. "Our Consensus will be as resolute as theirs."

"You will vote with the rest, when the call comes. This afternoon, after the talley, the Dissenters will be called together and the five Executioners will do their duty. Five. You included. There will be an esper team on stand-by duty to insure your mental integrity. Perhaps, if you can complete your chores this afternoon, you will be permitted to retain your status.

He rose.

He left.

There are patches of freckles on the timpani membrane, and at one place there is the strawberry glow of a birthmark . . .

At noon: the Poll. I had not left my room, too tense to take in any entertainment or to talk with my fellow citizens of the multi-level maze of our city. At precisely twelve, the screen of my scanner lighted, and the familiar face of Harrison Bonifex was there, gray-haired and distinguished. Succinctly, he explained the situation in the Mediterranean and outlined the two proposals before the public. Then the identi-plate at the base of the set lighted. Those wishing to vote for the milder embargo proposal were invited to place their fingerprints on the lighted rectangle. Harrison explained, quite seriously, yet with a feeling of cameraderie that he always managed, that those who did not vote would be considered Dissenters and susceptible to later probes and, perhaps, execution. I waited until the war proposal was up for vote, then added my prints to the talley.

All over the vast complex of our city, others were making the decision, either on private scanners in their

homes or on the banks of public voting scanners in the business districts, parks and theaters.

Preliminary reports indicated that 89.78 percent of the public had voted for the war recommendation. Secondary probes were initiated in those cases where citizens had voted against the Consensus. In ten minutes, Bonifex reported that the large majority of those who had voted against the Consensus had pleaded either ignorance of the issue, momentary insanity or some other legal excuse and had submitted to a three minute mind scour under the helmet attached to their voting sets. They had registered a change in their votes; the pro-war majority now stood at 97.62 percent.

I nodded approval, proud of my fellow citizens. It would be disgraceful if our city approved the pro-war recommendation with anything more than .009 percent less enthusiasm than the other cities showed.

Third stage probes were run, with subliminal suggestion and fear-impetus. More citizens agreed. Now, 99.63 percent of the city's populace endorsed the Consensus viewpoint.

Esper teams were dispatched to arrest those still dissenting, and Bonifex assured us that Fourth Stage probes would separate the incurable from those thousands and deliver the Absolute Dissenters to the Executioners for destruction.

Half an hour after that, the Executioners were summoned to their stations. The Poll was concluded; Harrison Bonifex faded away.

I dressed in my black clothes and slid on the crimson skullcap of my office. After a careful inspection in the mirror, I left my room and descended to the Judgment Theater without making use of the pedestrian walkway. All Executioners, like all Correlators and other city government officials, live about the rim of the metropolis complex, within easy distance of the chambers of government. I stepped into the shaft, felt the gravity plates grip me, fell downward to duty.

As in most Polls in recent years, there were few Dissenters. Consensus government had not only insured that the will of the majority would be done, but that the majority would grow, that the wisdom of the masses would filter into the growing generations and that ever greater percentages of them would be enlightened. Today, out of the nine million of our city's population, there were but a hundred and twelve Absolute Dissenters.

The four other executioners waited on their thrones, dressed identically, solemn with the weight of their duty. I took my place beside them and began the complex train of thoughts which lead to the final mastery of the Shasumi Rules of mental discipline. Within my mind, all was orderly. At the bottom of the pit, only the liquid entity of the id glared back at me. No silver banshees tried to scale the walls of the chasm.

The Seven Correlators of the Consensus were at their podiums, dressed in blue and white cloaks, the flag patch of our city above their hearts, the decal of our nation just below.

For an instant, I wondered what the Consensus ceremonies were like in the Sino-Turkish coalition, in the Canadian Combine. In the South American Alliance or the Nippon Island Federation?

Correlator Rainey called for the opening of the plastic wall between the Absolute Dissenters and the rest of us. It rose into the ceiling.

Teams of espers maintained careful control of the ranks of the condemned, those miserable creatures whom Nature had endowed with an unforgiveable perversity. Only a few of them were foolish enough to run at us or toward the doors. They suffered the excruciating pain of a cerebral hemorrhage induced and controlled by the chalk-faced telepathists. They lay on the floor, stupified, either staring sightlessly or babbling with pain. They were not permitted unconsciousness.

Correlator Jennings recited the Justification of Judgment, which was little more than a formality these days.

"The society of mankind cannot be sustained without Consensus. When the ranks of dissenters reach proportions which encourage revolution, all men are endangered by disorder. Yet, throughout history it has been shown that death alone will not still the voices of the perverse. Thus, the Consensus government has adapted those talents of psionically gifted citizens in order to make the punishment more severe for this most heinous of crimes. It is the hope of the Correlators present today, and of the Executioners as well, that harsher punishments will lead to fewer deviates among us."

He returned to his place. Magnusson came forward and took part in the ritual: "You have proven yourselves unattuned to the Consensus and will be terminated by these teams of espers. At the moment of your death, an Executioner will establish linkage with your soul and claim it."

One of the condemned wailed.

Magnusson continued: "You will be denied an afterlife for as long as the Executioner lives, attaining your heaven or hell only upon his physical demise. Each day in this special purgatory will be as a hundred years to you. May your agony of eternal waiting be a sign to others that they learn what the Consensus will perform to maintain stability in our society." He was finished.

I was a hundred and four years old then. Some of the other Executioners were well past three hundred. In our history, the average age length of one talented as I am was four hundred years. Perhaps those extra souls, caught in the insubstantial substantiality of our ids served to revitalize us and provided our longevity.

The espers lead the Dissenters forward, five at a time. It was my duty to claim the souls of twenty-two of them. It was a meager figure. I could remember, in my earlier years of service, when I soaked up the immortal energies of a hundred in every ceremony. Nowadays, even this pitiful clot of less than two dozen was the nearest thing to a feast I would ever see. Often there were only three

and four victims for each of the city's Executioners. Reports from our guild told us that the situation was much the same all over the country—and in other nations where Consensus politics had been in power for more than a few generations.

We grasped their immortal souls while the telepathists exploded their brains within their traitorous skulls. Special altarboys removed the corpses on gravity sledges while, in our minds, the dead men lived on as silver analogues, thrust beneath the ugly seas of our innermost mental depths . . .

As I snatched my tenth victim's soul, I felt *her* fingers latching onto the walls of my conscious mind, and I knew that Jennifer had somehow escaped from the pit without my knowledge. Her metal digits bored into me, and she clamped down on my mind and began to methodically destroy it. I had time only to wonder why it must always be this same girl, why the others were so repeatedly clumsy in their attempts to take me over. She was the only sly one, the only competent one of all the many thousands buried deep inside me.

It was as if she knew me well, knew my mind intimately, and was therefore able to move about in it with more ease than a stranger.

I knew her name was Jennifer. I knew little else about her. How could she threaten to govern me with so little effort?

Behind her, now that she had shown them the way once more, the others came, hordes of metallic puppets jerking upwards on invisible strings. It was a gleaming tide of hard flesh, and it would overwhelm me more swiftly than ever before if I did not get help.

The espers monitoring me noticed the trouble. Three of them stepped into my mind, a trio of foggy figures who tossed bolts of light about. Smoke roiled out of the id pit. The silver legions clinging to those walls fell backwards, into the madness of the center of my being.

Jennifer hung on, tenacious. But as the battle raged,

she lost ground and was driven closer and closer to the sea-bottomed drop. When her bright form exploded under the steady hammering of the espers' energy swords, my own body seemed to erupt as well. I went down, toppling from my throne, humiliated before the Absolute Dissenters who had not suffered their just reward at my hands.

At the great timpani, a silver hand beats upon the tight membrane with a human arm for a drumstick . . .

Because I am an Executioner and not merely an esper, they gave me one last chance. My kind is rare. To retire my powers without first making every attempt to cure me—even in this age of declining dissent—would be a crime against the Consensus.

That night, I slept under carefully prescribed sedation while a trio of espers stood guard over me.

In the morning, garbed in a standard green cloak with matching blouse and slouch hat, brown trousers and boots, I went down the central core of our city, accompanied by the espers, to the Temporal Theater where the rarest of all espers were waiting for me. Our city had but two of them, and few cities had more than that necessary minimum. They were the time travelers who could rend the veil of the fourth dimension and move freely in it. This featureless chamber was their domain, and they greeted me host-to-guest with polite nods of their swollen, pop-eyed heads.

In moments, they linked thin arms about me and sealed us in the warmth of their extra-temporal fields. We left the smooth-walled room and traveled through space as well as time, so that when we arrived in the year 1972, it was at a location on the North American continent different than that from which we had departed eight centuries in the future.

We were in a shabby, rented room in Washington, D.C. There was an iron bed with a sagging mattress, a

nightstand with a peeling mahogany veneer, a badly scarred chair with stuffing bursting from it in half a dozen places. A small table and two straight-backed chairs. A fifteen-year-old refrigerator. A cardboard closet with a few pieces of clothes in it. And the man. The man was sitting in the middle of the bed with a Colt .38 in his hands. He was trying to get the nerve to pull the trigger. The barrel was balanced between his lips, turned slightly upwards toward the top of his skull.

"Put the gun down, Weissner," one of the espers said as both of them untangled themselves from me.

Weissner was crying. His hands shook, and he looked as if he might pull the trigger accidentally before he managed it on purpose.

The esper repeated his command.

Weissner dropped the .38 on the mattress, rubbed his nose, which was runny, and looked us over. He was a pale, stubble-cheeked imitation of a man, sitting there in his gray underwear, a flea on the underbelly of his world.

"Who are you?" he asked, suddenly curious about our strange dress, the swollen-headed appearance of the time espers, the abnormal skull that was my own, and our magic appearance before him.

The esper explained. To my surprise, Weissner sat, nodding continually as if he perfectly understood time travel and espers. I realized that his acceptance was based on mental instability, and that he could absorb the wildest concepts merely because his touch with reality was so tenuous as to make almost anything seem concrete—anything from ghosts to time travel.

I called an esper aside and voiced these fears.

"He is not insane," the esper assured me. "He's one of those who live in the gray borderlands of sanity and madness, but he has too much motivation to ever cross from this side into that. He is an American Nazi Party member and lives for that philosophy."

"If he is so strongly motivated, why was he about to kill himself?"

The time esper looked at Weissner, then back at me. "When a man's motivation is so fierce behind a cause so hopeless, there comes a point when his mind seeks the escape of death. When he realizes he cannot attain his goals, the only way to terminate that awful energy is in death."

"But if we let him in my mind, and if his motivations are so strong, how can we be certain that he will not become more of a threat to my mental sanctity than anyone I now contain?"

"Because his nature is such a fractured one. He will be able to ruthlessly ride herd upon those whom you already contain, but he will not be able to concentrate his efforts on the very different task of assuming control of you. Besides, he will be too pleased with the thousands of souls he will command inside your id to consider risking that in order to control you alone."

I said no more. Time espers had performed this service for dozens of Executioners the world over, in every nation in the last six centuries. They had never made a mistake. A warden for the id was chosen with much care. Weisserman was to be my warden; he would be perfect.

By this time, the second esper had explained the situation to the shabby little man. Weisserman seemed to grasp the import of what they were offering him. He agreed, with but a few questions, and in another ten minutes he was a silver form within my mind. With no thought to attacking my own stability, he descended into the id pit where he would soon be master, his primitive ruthlessness more than a match for the inexperienced Dissenters trapped within me.

The espers had been watching within my mind, and now they withdrew, pleased. "It will go well," one of them said. "He will have his facist kingdom."

"I hope," I said.

Infinity Three

Weisserman's slack body rested on the bed. It still contained his mind, was still capable of thought. The soul and the mind are two of the same quantity, though the soul has extra-spatial qualities which the mind does not. Though he still thought, it was on a one-to-one basis, without a trace of philosophy or a sense of past and future, perhaps as a very bright animal might think. His eyes were flat and lusterless and possessed a cunning that made me feel more ancient than I was.

They gave him a cerebral hemorrhage and let him die on that bed with the unused Colt .38 beside him. In the depths of my psionic mind, he lived on in secret passages, assembling his dictatorial reign. I could forget about Jennifer, for he would humble her and the legions behind her.

They locked me in their arms, tore the fabric of time. And we went home . . .

At first, all was well. There were four more Polls in the next five days, and a total of a hundred and eighty citizens were sentenced to execution. I took my share of souls, pleased with the rapid world events that made so many votes necessary in one week, and I did not even experience a ripple as the silver analogues fell into the acid wastes of the pit.

At night, I slept without fear.

During the day, I took in all the city's entertainments, each of which seemed more dazzling than ever. My brushes with death and madness had made life more precious.

Magnusson visited me and went away satisfied.

And I took souls.

I took souls.

Until one of them took me . . .

It started with a dream:

*On the brow of a low hill, under a leaden sky,
sat a large cement-walled factory. Olive-colored
trucks unloaded grimy lots of prisoners, men*

and women and children. The prisoners filed through the doorway where a guard in black monitored their progression. Deeper in the complex, they were separated and fed through processing doors one at a time. With boiling waters and flaying knives, workers in other black uniforms skinned the corpses after the gas chambers had done their work. The skin was processed in yet another room, pounded and tanned and worked together into large sheets. The sheets were taken into a final large chamber where skilled craftsmen worked diligently on the construction of the largest drum I had ever seen.

And the drum was done: a timpani . . .

And it was transported, by large military vans, to this place of utter darkness.

And in the utter darkness, He came.

And he danced.

Silver feet upon a human timpani and the silent laughter of a sealed metallic mouth: these were the only sounds in eternity . . .

And each beat of the membrane was the essence of a million screams of dying people locked in ovens that were filled with gas . . .

When I woke, sweating and trembling, Weisserman was in my conscious mind. He had crawled from the pit of the id where he belonged and had insinuated himself into my own region of sanctity.

I tried to thrust him out and down. But he remained, more tenacious than the girl named Jennifer.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He did not reply, but within my mind, his insane dreams of Dachau and Belsen, of gas ovens and corpses played in brilliant colors. And always, always, the sequence ended with a mammoth timpani and the tapping silver feet that were the analogue limbs of Weisserman.

I found I was unable to speak. I worked my lips, producing nothing but a weak sigh. I rose against my will and dressed in the clothes I had been wearing that day. I tried to reassert control of my body, but he had taken too strong a hold on me. I left my room for the whispering calm of night at the core of our city.

We went down to the Correlator's floor, first to Jennings' apartment. Though we awakened him, he opened the door for us and admitted us to his apartment—unaware that an enemy had breached his threshold.

"What is it at this hour?" he asked, rubbing his sleep puffed face, blinking at us.

In the instant, Weisserman use my psionic brain's capacities to strip Correlator Jennings of his immortal soul. He moved beyond Jennings to the bedroom and there took the soul of the buxom, long-legged girl whom the Correlator had taken as his mistress. When we returned to Jennings, we posed a set of conditions to him, which he readily agreed to. He could not exactly understand what had been stripped from him, but he understood that he must apply himself assiduously, in our service, to regain the missing quality.

In two hours, the Correlators were ours, and the seat of government in the city now lay not with the elected officials, but within the silver hands of Weisserman, a political fanatic from the past.

I wished an esper would encounter us and examine my mind. But it was a futile hope, for only the Correlators could order a mind-probe. And they were now in Weisserman's control.

We returned to my room, and we sat.

In a concerted effort, Weisserman forced my soul from out my body, abandoned his silver analogue and took intimate control of the mental shell and mortal flesh that had once been mine. I found myself within the confines of *his* consciousness now, inhabiting a silver analogue of the sort to which I had condemned so many thousands in the past.

I dug fingers into the walls of his conscious mind and kicked. I screamed those wordless words that analogues make. While they made sense to me, now, here, I understood that they were only gibberish to him.

He played swords of light across me. They rang off my metal hide and reverberated through the core of my body. I was propelled backwards to the brink of the pit of his id.

A stench rose out of that place, a stench of rot and corruption. The color of the ocean at its bottom was darker and uglier than the one in my own id had been. Beasts rose in that foul water and looked longingly upward at my glittering form. They were reptillian monsters, though each had Weisserman's face and a swastika for a tongue.

Then I fell into that limbo, screaming without moving my lips . . .

The time espers had made several mistakes. They had not considered that Weisserman's brand of near-madness might become true insanity at the shock of having his soul peeled out from his body, and that he would find a strength in total madness that he had not possessed in the borderlands of insanity. And they failed to see that our city is the raw material of Weisserman's concept of paradise. We call it democracy; he says it is facism. It is not a difference of terms that causes confusion on this last point. Only one term is involved, really: democracy. Both Weisserman and the Consensus view it as the same thing. It is not what the term meant a few centuries ago.

And now, population pressures having bred individual belligerance out of the average citizen, the belligerant Weisserman is in a position to fulfill his dreams. He is our leader, even if he maintains his post behind the scenes. He will fare well; I know it. Already, he has seen that the Consensus is restless and that there are too few Absolute Dissenters these days. The masses need those upon whom they can vent their frustrations. He has placed a question before the public in a Poll. Should we

war with the Canadian Combine . . . or should we not? Though Canada is an age-old ally, she stubbornly refuses to open her vast lands to immigration, even though she hasn't reached population saturation and is, in fact, living a man-to-land ratio centuries old. The rest of us are crushed: her selfishness is plain.

The Consensus, of course, said, "War!" and so it is. We push forward into Earth's last frontier. Then we will have the Sino-Turkish coalition. Not for their open land; they have none. But just to have them.

There is no end to what we will become.

Any consensus is soulless. And without a soul, anything that can be imagined can be performed without remorse. It is Weisserman's great strength that he has seen this.

At night, Weisserman dreams of that timpani, and the images are carried to the thousands here in the chaos of this inner world. My only regret, as these fleeting glimpses of amoral greatness reach me, is that I will not be up there to share in them with the Polled.

Weisserman is a man of iron and will never be unseated from the body which was once mine.

A million years ago? Or yesterday?

I am alone down here. That is the worst of it. I was the executioner of all these tens of thousands, yet I only knew Jennifer well. And though I have suggested to her that we restore our man-and-wife relationship down here, she shuns me with silver stares and silver words that she spits from motionless, bright lips. And when, at night, Weisserman does his dance on a human timpani, I hear her laughing. And I realize there never were pipers behind those black velvet curtains. The music is the tinkle of her mirth, and to that mirth the silver feet click frantically on the tattooed skin . . .

Dead yesterday . . . or dead tomorrow . . .

ANTIQUITY: A MEDITATION

Anthony Weller

The sun's rays on weatherbeaten gray stone;
The whirlwind evolution of age-old rock to dim, lost
sands;
The silent triumph of nature over nature;
Like all things, they are one.
As fire glinting on a savage dais,
They are reflections off a dead man's eyes.
They are the howl of the wolf in the emptiness of night.
They are the loon's cry on its upward, endless journey.
Antiquity is all these things.

In times past, vigilant sentries guard their fortress
of content
with the secrecy that guards the past.
For antiquity is a poem
Without form, reason, or rhyme;
a moment, and a thousand million moments.

If the world is a facade, must all the players be false?

BEECH HILL

Gene Wolfe

"Bubba goes off by himself like this every year—don't you, Bubba?" So Maryanne had said, and looked venomously at Bobs. He recalled it as he sat in Beech Hill pretending to read, his legs primly together, his back (because, no longer young, it hurt if he sat on his spine) straight.

"I suppose he needs it. Uh . . . needs the rest." Thus Mrs. Hilliard, a friend of Maryanne's friend Mrs. Main.

"That's what I always say. I say: 'Bubba, God knows you work hard all year. We don't have much money, but you go off by yourself like you always do and spend it. I can get around in my chair perfectly well, and anyway Martha Main will come over to look after me. Nobody ought to have to take care of a cripple forever, but if it wasn't for Martha I don't know what I'd do.'"

Mrs. Hilliard had asked, "Where do you go, Mr. Roberts?"

Someone came in, and Bobs looked up and saw the Countess, black hair stretched tight around her after-midnight face. His watch said seven and he wondered if she had been up all night.

At seven, fifty-one weeks of the year, he was at work. He looked at the watch again. Twelve hours later he and

Maryanne had dinner, again at seven. Afterward he read while she watched TV. At six he would get up, and at seven relieve the night man.

Bishop came in, followed by a young man Bobs had not seen before. The young man was pale and nervous, Bishop portly and assured behind mustache, beard, eyebrows, and tumbling iron-gray forelock. "You're among us early this morning, Countess."

"I could not sleep. It is often so."

Bishop nodded sympathetically, then gestured toward the young man beside him. "Countess, may I present Dr. Preston Potts. Dr. Potts is a physicist and mathematician—the man who developed the lunar forcing vectors. You may have heard of him . . ."

More formally he said to Potts, "Dr. Potts, the Countess Esterhazy."

"I *have* heard of Dr. Potts, and I am charmed." The Countess held out a limp hand glittering with rhinestones. "I at first thought you were a doctor who might give me something for my not sleeping, but I am even so charmed."

Potts stammered: "Our a-a-astronauts have trouble sleeping too. If you imagine you're in space it might help you f-f-feel better about it."

The Countess answered, "We are all in space always, are we not?" and smiled her sleepy smile.

For a moment Potts stood transfixed, then managed to smile weakly in return. "You are something of a mathematician yourself. Yes, we are all in space or we would not exist—perhaps that's why we sometimes have trouble sleeping."

"You are so clever."

"And this is Mr. Roberts," Bishop continued, drawing Potts away from the Countess. "I cannot tell you a great deal about Mr. Roberts' activities, but he is one of the men who protect the things you discover."

Bobs stood to shake hands and added: "And who occasionally arrange that you discover what someone else has

just discovered on the other side. Pleased to meet you, Dr. Potts. I know your work."

"Looks a lot like Bond, doesn't he?" he overheard Bishop say as the two of them left him. "But he's different in one respect. Our Mr. Roberts is the real thing."

Bobs sat down again. There was a Walther PPK under his left arm, but it was no help and he felt unsettled and a little afraid. Behind him, at the far end of the big room, Bishop was introducing Potts to someone else—Claude Brain, the wild animal trainer, from the sound of the voice—and he caught the words, "Welcome to Beech Hill."

Each year he came to Beech Hill by bus, with an overnight stop. The stop had, itself, become a ritual. In fact the entire trip from the moment he carried his bag out of the apartment was marked with golden milestones, events that were—so strong was the anticipation of pleasure—pleasures themselves.

To enter the terminal and buy his ticket; to sit on the long wooden bench with the travel-worn, with the servicemen on leave, with the young, worried, cheaply clothed women with babies, and the silent, shabby men (like himself) he always hoped were going to their own Beech Hills, but who, in their misery, could not have been.

To sit with his bag between his feet, then carry it to be stowed in the compartment under the bus floor. To zoom the air-conditioned roads and watch the city slip behind. The hum of the tires was song, and if he were to fall asleep on the bus (he never did) he would know even sleeping where he was.

And the stop. The hotel. A small, old, threadbare hotel; they never put him in the same room twice, but he could walk the corridors and recall them all: *Here's where, coming, in '62. There in '63. The fourth floor in '64.* He stayed at the hotel on the return trip as well, but the rooms, even last year's room, faded.

Checking in; he always asked if they had his reservation, and they always did. A card to sign—*R. Roberts*, address, *no car*.

And the room: a small room on an airshaft, bright papered walls with big flowers, a ceiling fixture with a string. And the door, a solid door with a chain and dead-bolt. *Snick! Rattle!* His bag on the bed. Secret papers on the bed. *Not NOW, Maryanne, I'm not decent.* His hand on the Luger. If Maryanne should see those— It would be his duty, and the Organization would cover for him as it always did . . . Suppose she hadn't heard him? *Come in—Snickback!—Maryanne, Rattle!* His own sister, they say. There's devotion for you!

He always changed at the hotel the day he arrived, not waiting until morning. This time too, he had removed his old workaday clothes, showered, and, glowing, gone to the open bag for new, clean underwear bought for the occasion—and executive length hose. His shirt of artificial fabrics that looked like silk stayed new from year to year; he wore it only at Beech Hill. His slacks were inexpensive, but never before worn.

He was proud of his jacket, though it had been very cheap; an old Norfolk jacket, much abused (by someone else) but London made. The elbows had been patched with leather; the tweed smelled faintly of shotgun smoke, and the pockets were rubber lined for carrying game. *Handy in my line of business.* Just the sort of coat the right sort of man would continue to wear though it was worn out, or nearly. Also just the sort to effectively conceal his HSc Mauser in its shoulder holster—at Beech Hill.

But not at the stop. Regretfully he left the Mauser in his bag; but this too was part of the ritual. The empty holster beneath his arm, the strange clothes, told him where he was. Even if he had fallen asleep . . . (but he never did.)

There were restaurants near the hotel, and he ate qui-

etly a meal made sumptuous by custom. There was a newstand where he stopped for a few paperbacks, and, next door, a barbershop.

A haircut was not part of the ritual, but it might well be. He might, in years to come, remember this as the year when he had first had his hair cut on the way to Beech Hill. The shop was clean, busy, but not too busy, smelling of powder and alcoholic tonics. He stepped inside, and as he did a customer was stripped of his striped robe and dusted with the whisk. "You're next," the barber said.

Bobs looked at another (waiting) customer, but the man gestured wordlessly toward the first chair.

"Chin up, please. Medium on the sides?"

"Fine."

There was a television, not offensively loud, in a corner. The news. He watched.

"Don't move your head, sir."

The man on the screen was portly, expensively dressed, intelligent looking. A newsman, microphone in hand, spoke deferentially: *a strike . . . pollution . . . Washington?*

"I know that man." Bobs twisted in the chair. "He's a billionaire."

"Damn near. He sure enough owns a lot around here."

When Bobs paid him the barber said, "You feel okay, sir?"

The next day he dropped the black Beretta into its holster. On the bus the weight of it made him feel for a moment (he had closed his eyes) that the woman next to him was leaning against him. The woman next to him became Wally Wallace, a salesman he had once known, the man who had introduced him to Beech Hill; but that seemed perfectly natural. Opposite, so that the four of them were face to face as passengers had once sat in trains, were Bishop and his wife, pretending not to know them. This was courtesy—the Bishops never spoke to

anyone until it had been definitely decided what they were going to be. He knew that without being told.

"You . . ." Wally began. Bobs suddenly realized that he (Bobs) was ten years younger, and the wistful thought came that he would not remain so. ". . . can't beat this place. There's nothing like it." Bobs had wondered if Wally were not getting a commission—or at least a reduction in his own rate—for each new guest he brought. Wally had returned the second year, but never after that. Lost in the jungle he loved.

When Bishop and Potts and Claude Brain were gone (they had said something about a morning swim) he remarked to the Countess, "I saw a friend of ours on television. On my way up." He mentioned the billionaire's name.

"Ah," said the Countess. "Such a nice man. But," (she smiled brilliantly) "married."

"He was here when I first came."

At first he thought the Countess was no longer listening to him, then he realized that he had not spoken aloud. The billionaire *had* been there when he had first come. Very young, as everyone had said, to have made so much money. Great drive.

And yet perhaps—he tried to push the thought back, but it came bursting in anyway, invading his consciousness like the wind entering a pauper's shack: *perhaps he had made it.*

He had wanted to so badly. You could see it in his eyes. And then—

What fun! What sport to return, posing with the others year after year.

The bastard.

The bastard. Was he here yet?

He could not sit still. The fear was on him, and he stalked out of the immense house that was Beech Hill, hardly caring where he was going. The ground sloped down, and ahead the clear water of the lake gleamed.

Half a dozen guests were swimming there already: drama critic, heart surgeon, the madame of New York's most exclusive brothel. Fashion designer, big game hunter, test pilot. He stood and watched them until Claude Brain, coming up behind him, said, "No dip today, Roberts?"

"I don't, usually," Bobs replied, turning. Brain was in trunks. His arms were horribly scarred, and there were more scars on his chest and belly.

His eyes followed Bobs'. "Tiger," he said. "I was lucky."

"I guess it's hard to become a wild animal man? Hard to get started?"

Brain nodded. "There aren't many spots. A few places around Hollywood, and a few shows. You try and try, but most of them have already had so much trouble with greenhorns they won't touch you."

"I'll bet," Bobs said sympathetically.

"Hell, I did everything. For years. Sold shoes, worked in a factory. Bought my own animals. First one was a mountain lion. Cost me three hundred and fifty, and I've still got him."

"I know how you must feel," Bobs said. He watched Brain go down into the water. His back was scarred too.

There was a path along the water's edge. He walked slowly, head down, until he saw the girl; then she looked at him and smiled, and he said, "Sorry. Hope I'm not intruding."

"Not at all," the girl said. "I should be over with the others, but I'm afraid I'm shy." She was beautiful, in the blonde-cheerleader-girl-next-door way.

"Your first season?"

She nodded.

"You're the actress then. Bishop said something about you when I checked in last night."

"Thanks for not saying *starlet*." She smiled again.

"The star. That's what Bishop called you. Have you made many pictures?"

“Just one—*Bikini Bash*. You didn’t—”

Bobs shook his head. “But I will, the next chance I get.”

“They say a lot of important people come here.”

Bobs nodded. “To look at the nuts.”

The girl laughed. “I get it. Beechnuts.”

“Yeah, Beechnuts. Listen, I want you to do me a favor.” He drew his pistol and handed it to her. “What’s this?”

Puzzled, she looked at it for a moment, then laughed again. “A toy pistol?”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. It says right here on it: British Imperial Manufacture, and then: MADE IN HONG KONG.”

He took the gun and threw it as far as he could out into the lake. She stared at him, so he said: “Remember that. You may be called to testify later,” before he walked away.

*When the world reaches its ending, the pale rider may
come on the smallest beast . . .*

A TIME OF THE FOURTH HORSEMAN

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro

"Never mind," Dr. Smith snapped at the intern. "He's dead." Angrily he jerked the feeder lines from the SUPPORT module, bitter lines of exhaustion showing on his face.

"But what happened?" asked the intern. He was both hurt by the death of his patient and frustrated by how little he had done to save the boy.

Dr. Smith finished closing down the monitor display before he answered. At last he said, "That child was admitted with minor bronchial inflammation." He looked down at the pinched, ashen face. "Fever developed, the chest became congested. We performed a tracheotomy." He fingered the disconnected tube that dangled from the boy's thin neck. "We added precautionary support. And about ten minutes ago the monitor picked up trouble and now, cardiac arrest."

The intern shook his head helplessly. "But don't you know what did it?"

"No. I don't." With that Dr. Smith stepped out of the room and rang for the removal units.

As he walked away from his assistant he was scowling. No, he didn't know what had killed the boy. He hadn't known what had killed the other fourteen children.

Fourteen in less than a week. He had run every sample he could think of through the diagnostic computers and had got the same results each time: Type unknown. That meant a mutation. But if it were a mutation, why so few?

"Dr. Smith. Paging Dr. Smith," intoned the commsystem. "Dr. Smith to level nine."

Damn, he thought. *That's Justin and his crowd*. He knew the epidemiologist well enough to dislike the cool, statistical mind that lay behind the politic smile and large green eyes. Well, there was no putting it off. Half-way down the hall he picked up an emergency phone long enough to say: "Harry Smith. Tell Dr. Justin I'm on my way."

Peter Justin had his smile on automatic when Harry Smith walked in. He waited until the resident had chosen a seat and then flung a stack of diagnostic printouts on the desk.

Harry Smith's eyes flickered between the cards and Dr. Justin's face, settling on the latter. "Yes?"

"Would you kindly explain these?"

Harry considered saying no. He laced his fingers together over his knee. "Just checking," he said.

"Do you seriously call this checking? There are fourteen different postmort full series here. I think you have some explaining to do."

"Do you?" Harry asked. "In the last week I have lost fifteen patients under age ten. All were admitted for treatment of a bronchial condition. They all died. I want to know why, and since your department doesn't seem to be doing anything about it . . ." Harry felt his voice rise; he forced himself to take a deep breath. ". . . I thought someone ought to check them out."

Dr. Justin's elegant brows drew together, his wide firm lips pursed. "Yes. I see. Fourteen on your service."

"Fifteen," Harry corrected.

"Fifteen? And you indicate here," he tapped at the printouts, "that all these occurred in roughly a week's

time. That is quite a large number for so short a time. All children?"

"All under ten," Harry said, a sardonic smile touching his lips.

Dr. Justin drummed his slender fingers on the high gloss of his masonite desk. "That is a significant increase."

That was Justin. Give him a death or a disease and he would try to fit it into a graph. Harry forced himself to keep quiet.

"Fifteen," Peter Justin murmured. "All bronchial. Very unusual." He looked up, the smile returning to his face. "Yes. I am glad you brought this to my attention, Smith. Ordinarily your actions would warrant a review, but under the circumstances . . ."

Under the circumstances, thought Harry, *you don't want to be caught in a neglect suit*. His smile, directed at Justin, was thinly veiled rage.

"Yes. You must let me know if you get another one. Any bronchial admit in the next two weeks, provided the patient is within the age bracket, should be reported to this office. I really must thank you for calling this to my attention. I don't know how I could have missed it."

Harry had a retort to this, but left it unsaid. He was very tired and was due back on the floor in less than six hours. So he rose, saying, "Any time. It looked suspicious and I thought it needed looking into."

Justin nodded. "You were right. Although you should have come to me first."

"Probably." He agreed, going to the door. "If you find out what it is, you will let me know."

"Certainly, certainly," Justin said blithely. "A thing like this takes some tracking. It might be a while. Goodnight, Dr. Smith."

"Goodnight, Dr. Justin."

Number sixteen was waiting for him when he got to the hospital in the morning. This time the child was very

young, no more than three, and the only son of another doctor in the same hospital.

"Two doctors," the intern informed him. "Mark Howland and Natalie Lebbreau are married."

"Lebbreau on level eleven, is it?" Hospital gossip had been hinting that the marriage was breaking up. Briefly he wondered if the child had been an issue.

"The name is Phillip Howland," the intern informed him. "Age three years seven months. He's underweight and his eyes need correction. He was hospitalized last year with a broken wrist."

Broken wrist. Was that the parents' doing? There were more and more of them being brought in: children beaten, starved, maimed, burned, tortured. As many times as he had seen it, Harry still felt sickened at the thought.

"The wrist was broken at the day care center. He fell from a ladder," the intern said.

"Thank you. What has been ordered so far?"

"The usual. IV, Oxygen unit. Standard monitor hookup and SUPPORT systems."

"Good," Harry nodded absently. He was already checking over the boy, touching, listening, probing for some clue to the secret of the disease that was wasting him and had wasted fifteen others. "What tests have you run?" he asked as he worked.

"Standard series."

"Post the results in Dr. Justin's office." There was a grim satisfaction in being able to upset Peter Justin and his staff of number keepers.

"How long has his breathing been augmented?"

"Roughly two hours." The intern frowned at this information as he read it. "Two hours? He isn't going to make it, is he?"

"No." Harry said shortly. "Not now." He stepped back from the fragile child in the bed. "I think you better notify his parents. Get them over here if you can."

The intern was only too glad to have the chance to escape.

Left alone with Phillip Howland, Harry found himself helpless. There was only so much he could do, only so much he was allowed to authorize, then he would have to go to the administrative staff and ask for more equipment, more medication, an intensive care unit. All that took time, and the boy in the bed had none. He had no way to save him.

During the next ninety minutes Harry watched the boy's condition deteriorate. Breathing became shallow, the pulse erratic and light. As the circulation worsened the tiny nails took on a bluish cast, the sunken face turned gray. Harry watched the monitor display, as inexorable as a Greek chorus foretelling the necessary end.

At 11:37 Phillip Howland was dead. He had died alone.

Harry sat in the darkest corner of the surgeon's lounge, wondering why he had become a doctor. It felt . . . *good* to save lives. And, when he had specialized in pediatric surgery, lengthening his schooling by eight years, it had all seemed worthwhile. When had he lost the faith? He rubbed his forehead with clammy palms.

"Dr. Emile Harrison Smith?" asked a voice.

Harry looked up, startled. It was rare to hear his full name, especially in the surgeon's lounge. For a moment he was confused.

The woman in front of him was angular and slight, her too-square shoulders made even more unattractive by her hospital whites. Her light red hair might have been pretty but it was caught at the back of her neck in a bun. Skimpy brows grew straight above pale green eyes. She had been crying.

"Dr. Smith," she repeated in a surprisingly appealing voice, "I am Natalie Lebbreau."

Harry's face stiffened as he recognized her. "I see."

"I came as soon as I could." She looked away from

him. Her hands were jammed deep into her pockets. "Not soon enough, though."

"No. I'm sorry."

At first she said nothing, just stared toward the window where bright spring flowers nodded in the wind. She made a shudder like a sigh, then turned toward him. "Well, thank you. I had hoped we would be through with the two we have on eleven, but . . . They were stronger than Phillip."

Why doesn't she cry, Harry wondered. And then, "What two on eleven?"

"Sick children. Like Phillip. Diphtheria."

"Diphtheria?" He frowned. Then he understood. She couldn't handle the shock of losing her child yet. And she had been working with sick children. With greater compassion he began to sense what guilt she might be feeling now, the conflict she must have undergone when they brought her word of her son.

"They're all coming back again," she said wearily. "All the old diseases. They will be back and we will have to fight them all over again."

Fight them all over again? "How do you mean that, Dr. Lebbreau?" He knew how it sounded but hoped that he was mistaken; a doctor who breaks under strain is a tremendous risk.

"I've treated children with polio, with diphtheria, there's even an admit with smallpox."

Yes, yes nodded the flowers at the window. Oh yes. Natalie covered her eyes with trembling hands. "Oh, hell," she whispered.

Harry reached out his hand to comfort her, but as he touched her shoulder she pulled away. She was in worse shape than he thought, but not as bad as he had feared she might be. "I'm sorry. You looked so unhappy. I thought you might like to let it out."

The look she turned on him was one of complete disbelief. Then her eyes brightened and her face returned to the sadness. "Oh. I see. You mean about Phillip." She

shook her head. "No. I can't; not now. If I started crying for him, I'd never stop." She looked around nervously, as if frightened. "There are all those others to cry for."

So she was back to the others. Harry thought momentarily of notifying the chief resident on her level, but then, perhaps because he did not trust the hospital administration, decided against it.

"Let me call your husband," he said to her.

"No!" She looked even more startled than he did at this vehemence. "I mean . . ." she went on in some confusion, ". . . it isn't necessary. I am sure he knows by now. He knew Phillip was sick, and he knows . . . about the diseases," she finished lamely.

Then the rumors are right, Harry thought. *What a time to find out.* He understood her dislike of touching now. It would make it easier to talk with her. He tried to remember Dr. Howland: he was the one in charge of the labs. Young, tall, that tawny handsomeness that did not age well. A great deal of professional charm. And eyes colder than Justin's. It couldn't have been easy for her.

"Is . . ." He paused as he chose his words. "Is there anyone I could notify for you? School? Relatives?"

She shook her head. "No. No, thank you. I'll do that. Just file the death report for the County." She glanced anxiously at the door. "I really have to get back. I'm supposed to be on rounds right now."

"Then perhaps I'll see you later." To his own ears the words were stilted, but Natalie Lebbreau gave him the semblance of a smile. "Oh, yes. Thank you."

Just as she went out the door she said impulsively: "It was diphtheria."

Harry walked back to his on-duty station slowly, his hazel eyes clouded in thought. Obviously Natalie Lebbreau was in shock; emotionally she wasn't ready to handle both her son's death and the state of her marriage. She needed a third concern, something that would direct her attention away from her own problems. That had to be it.

She couldn't be right.

Because if she was, they were headed for disaster.

The seventeenth child did not appear for two days and Harry was beginning to hope that they had been treated, all of them; that the deaths were from a short-lived virus mutation that hadn't been pinned down yet; that the last of the pinched gray faces had belonged to Natalie Lebbreau's boy.

The late night city patrol changed that. They brought in two children, a boy and a girl, found sleeping under a freeway interchange. They had been abandoned the day before. They were cold, hungry, frightened . . . and sick.

"What's your name?" Harry asked the girl. She was the older of the two, about nine. She was sitting on her unit bed, scrawny arms dangling from the capacious hospital gown. Her dark eyes were defiant and her young face was set into an expressionless mask.

"Stephanie," she said, as if it were a swear word. "Where have you taken Brian?"

"Oh, not far. He's got himself another unit, just like yours."

The bright eyes showed scorn. "Why? Where'd you put him?"

Harry suddenly felt the desolation that Stephanie must know. She had been left by a roadside with her brother, parents gone to another city, another state. They had been abandoned. Now they were in the hands of strangers who separated them. He reached over and thumbed a concealed toggle. "There, Stephanie. Now, do you see this knob?" He pointed to the large red knob that controlled the phone screen.

"Yeah," she said gravely.

"Good. Now, when I am through checking you over, all you have to do is turn the knob to this position . . ." He moved aside so that she could see the position of the knob, ". . . and then you tell the lady on the screen who

you want to talk to. You and Brian can have a long, long talk."

"Why can't I see him?" she demanded.

"But you can. That's what the screen is for."

The girl gave a derisive snort. "I mean in person, mister."

That bothered Harry. "I'm afraid you can't see him in person for a while. I'm sorry, Stephanie."

Stephanie lapsed back into a sullen silence. It continued through the examination in spite of Harry's attempts to get her talking again. The only sound she made was one of pain when he tried to touch the welts on her back.

"I'm sorry you're hurt," he told her before he left her unit.

"Well!" Jim Braemoore beamed happily at Harry. "We haven't seen you down here in quite a while." He gestured expansively over the cafeteria. "Hasn't been the same since Chisholm died. A fine chef, that man. Told me once he had his personal spice racks back there in the kitchens. Quite illegal, of course, but the food was better."

Harry made an absent reply. It was too bad about Chisholm, yes. Too bad about everybody. He studied his cup of noff, recalling the time, over five years ago, when the near-coffee replaced the genuine article all over the hospital. The outrage had been fantastic. Now, no one seemed to notice. He supposed that in a year or so the doctors who complained now about the plain food served since Chisholm's death would no longer notice the bland pap being served.

"You look glum," observed Braemoore. "Working too hard, I can tell. Just can't take the job that much to heart, Harry. Ruin you if you do. Tell you what: we're mechanics. Much easier if you think of it that way."

"Mechanics," he repeated numbly. Was that the secret? How had he missed it all these years?

"You and Natalie. Get all involved, go about in a lather. No good. Wear yourselves out that way. Can't do it, Harry. Can't do it at all."

"Natalie? Lebbreau?"

Jim looked up, startled. "So you were listening after all. Wouldn't have thought so. Natalie Lebbreau is the one I meant. Good girl, fine doctor. Intense, very intense; plain girls often are, don't you think?" He smiled blandly and offered sugar. "Energy."

It didn't pour like real sugar, but what the hell. It was sweet and probably did give energy.

"Take me, now," Braemoore went on, his sausage-like fingers spread over his broad chest. "Know how to realize my limits. Don't take the office home with me, don't bother too much about CAs and other terminals. Better off letting them go. Why save 'em for more agony? Put my money on the ones who can get well. Ought to do the same yourself, Harry." He took a bite out of a droopy bit of pastry. The icing clung like snow to his moustache. "Can't be a good doctor the way you're going. Hear you've been handling the kids with bronchial trouble. No use fighting for them, Harry. Saw a few cases of it myself last week. Can't save 'em. No earthly use trying. Set 'em up, make 'em comfortable and get on with the strong ones."

I can't be hearing this. Harry told himself. *It's all a mistake.* "What are you saying, Jim? Are you telling me that it isn't my job to save lives?"

"Didn't say that!" Braemoore protested. "Nothing of the sort. Did say you shouldn't bother with terminals. Let 'em be. Put your time on the ones who survive. That's the way. Toddlers with that virus . . ."

"Are you sure it's a virus?" Even as he asked Harry knew that for some reason he could not understand, he no longer thought it was a virus. Jim was being almost too much the jolly old GP. There was something wrong when a doctor of Jim Braemoore's standing tried to throw a resident like Harry off the track.

"Of course it's a virus. Couldn't be anything else."

"What do the diagnostic samples say?"

Jim looked flustered, his normally pink face turning red as he answered. "Type unknown. Damn it all, you should know; you ordered the tests. Don't mind telling you that Justin was pretty unhappy about it. Not that it isn't his job to notice," Jim added hastily. "Hard to tell about Peter, sometimes. Noticed how he likes getting the records straight. Damned strange fellow."

"Am I being taken off the cases?" Harry asked, as calmly as he could.

"Taken off? What for? You know the field. Just a little advice, that's all. Help you keep your perspective. This over-concern, preoccupation, that can happen to anyone. Happened to me once, oh, long time ago. Took quite a while to set myself straight again. Wanted you to see how it is, let you know I understand." He pushed back from the table. "Sorry to leave you so soon, but must scrub for a CA. Mastectomy. Pity." He beamed broadly at Harry. "Delighted to have seen you, Smith. Don't have nearly enough time to talk these days. Just remember; one child—even half a dozen—doesn't make that much difference. Not worth the bother, Harry." With that as a parting remark he strode to the door and bellied through it.

"Brian shows three ribs broken and improperly healed as well as bruises and blisters on the ankles," the new intern reported. She was long, lanky and the color of caramel apples. "We found some nylon fibers in the infected area."

"Okay. They kept him tied up. What else?"

"Bruises on the side of the face, recent. Burn scars on the left and right forearm. Malnutrition. He is suffering from exposure and psychological trauma, but will probably pull through."

"And Stephanie?" Harry found it more and more difficult to keep the detached, professional attitude that

was required of him. Yet he dared not show great interest to this girl, obviously a plant from Justin, or Braemoore. Or both. He wanted to chide himself for paranoia or cynicism and found that he could not bring himself to do it. He sensed he was being watched, and knew he must tread warily.

"The girl," the intern went on, "is in somewhat better condition, at least outwardly. She does have a fever and complains of general body ache and a persistent headache."

"She probably tried to keep her brother warm and has had more exposure to cold," he suggested, covering a certain dread that made a cold fist in his guts. What if Natalie Lebbreau were right? She said she had had a patient with polio . . .

"I've had photographs taken of her back for the police records. Ian Parkenson had a look at her. He said the lashes were made with an old-fashioned electric cord."

Ian Parkenson was their expert on battered children, rarely called on so routine a case as this. Perhaps the intern had requested his opinion. "I see. Why did you call Dr. Parkenson in on the case? Anything the matter?"

"Dr. Justin sent him over; he said it was about the virus fatalities we've had with children. But this one isn't a bronchial inflammation."

Justin is checking on me. What for? Has he got more figures on those blessed charts of his? Aloud he said "He must be watching the pediatric admits pretty carefully."

"Oh, yes," said the intern. Then she giggled.

Harry scowled at her. "What was your name again?"

"Gloria Powell," she said, straightening her name badge over one unrealistically firm breast. "See?"

"Thanks," he said dryly. "I want to see the boy first and then the girl."

All business, Gloria Powell led the way to the units.

Brian lay on his side, restless. He had reached that stage of fatigue where normal sleep was impossible. As Harry stepped through the door Brian succeeded in

twitching his blanket off the bed. He gave a low whine and wriggled onto his side.

"Hello, Brian," Harry began, forcing himself to smile.

"Go 'way." He squinted up at Harry. "I don't like you."

Harry bent and picked up the blanket, noticing Gloria leaning over him, too obviously near. He stepped back as he stood up. "Here, Brian. You'll want your blanket later on."

The boy took it, wadded it and held it.

"Look," Harry began again, "so long as I'm here, why not let me check you over?"

"'Nother doctor did already."

"Yes, I know." Harry was getting impatient. "But I am *your* doctor and I would like to examine you. It won't take long, Brian."

"Where's Stephie? They said I could see her." The boy twisted and then sat up. "She said we'd be okay, just us together. What have you done with her?" With that, he started to cry.

Gloria Powell looked disgusted and started to tap on her clip-chart.

Harry had to admit that the puckered, red face buttoned with a runny nose was not very appealing. He also knew that he was clumsy with children. Reluctantly he sat on the side of the bed and put his arm around the wailing boy.

"It's okay, Brian. It really is. Don't worry about your sister; I saw her earlier and she was just as anxious to see you." He remembered he had shown her how to use the phone screen and wondered why she hadn't. "She probably thinks you're sleeping now and doesn't want to wake you up. And she's right, you know. If you have some sleep you'll feel much better. The sooner you can get better, the sooner you can go . . ." He stopped. Abandoned children do not go home. "The sooner you can leave here."

"I want Stephie!" Brian yelled.

"Doctor, really!" Gloria shook her head impatiently.

"Why hasn't this boy been sedated?" Harry demanded, feeling the tension in the slender shoulders. "In this condition he could have side effects from this prolonged wakefulness."

Gloria was prettily confused. "I didn't think we gave sedatives to children. I didn't order any for him."

"Well, what's stopping you from doing it now?" And what stopped Ian Parkenson from doing it when he examined Brian. "Never mind, I'll handle it when we leave." He turned his attention back to the child whose sobs had become short, jerky sighs. "Come on, Brian, just a few minutes and then you can go to sleep. When you wake up I'll take you over to see Stephie." He glanced at Gloria and saw the lovely mouth parted in distress. "What is it, doctor?" he asked sharply.

"Not here, doctor," she replied, and went out of the unit.

Shortly afterward he joined her. "Will you explain your remark, please?"

"Come with me," she said professionally.

But Harry didn't move. "Not until you tell me why."

She gave him a cool stare. "I am about to show you why, doctor. If you'll come with me." She led the way to Stephanie's unit.

"I think it's dreadful about those children."

"Yes," Harry nodded, pleasantly surprised to hear her so sympathetic. "It's criminal the way parents are allowed to abandon them."

Gloria opened startled eyes at him. "I meant that they were allowed to have them!" she said shortly.

In Stephanie's unit the girl lay under a breathing assist unit. The machine squatted over her body like a large, profane bird. The gauge registered light respiration.

"I see," said Harry. "When did this happen?"

"About an hour ago," Gloria said. She had come no farther into the unit than absolutely necessary. "One of the orderlies noticed the irregularity on the monitor and

rang for an assist. It's pretty serious," she added thoughtfully.

"I'm glad you've noticed. Is it too much to hope that there is a record of what's been done for her?"

"Oh, yes, here." She traced through the slips on the clip-chart, and finally handed him one, retreating to the doorway when through.

"Thanks." He read through the paper, stopping suddenly. "It authorizes transfer."

"Hum? Yes, it does," she nodded brightly.

"It doesn't say where."

She looked at her copy. "No, it doesn't." She frowned, then, "Probably they're short of beds and don't know which facility they're going to use yet. They'll fill it in later when they know where."

"But they don't transfer patients in this condition," Harry persisted. "This child cannot be moved."

"Dr. Parkenson signed the authorization," she stated. Her mouth narrowed.

"I know." It frightened him. "I'll check with Ian. He can't have seen her since they brought the unit. He'll see that she mustn't be moved."

Gloria glared at him, then turned and walked away. No intern would do that, yet she did.

Harry watched her go. "Tell Justin. Tell Parkenson! Tell Braemoore! I don't give a damn who you tell if it will save this child!"

He looked at the monitor. After five minutes he knew that Stephanie was number seventeen.

The voice on the phone was tired, still husky from sleep. "Yes? Dr. Howland here."

"Dr. Howland, is Dr. Lebbreau there?"

"No," the voice growled.

Harry gritted his teeth and went on. "Can you tell me when she is expected in?"

"She isn't." The line went dead.

Alone in the visitor's lounge Harry stood, stupidly

clinging to the receiver. What could have become of her? Where had she gone? He could put out a hospital alert—and rejected the idea as soon as he thought of it. There was a risk if Justin and his cronies found out. He had tried her level with no success.

On an off-chance, he tried the cafeteria and was startled to find her there, sitting in the far corner, alone. He picked up two cups of noff and went to her.

"Like another cup?" he asked when he reached her. He made a tentative smile.

"Oh. Thank you."

He put down the cups. "Mind if I join you? You look kind of lonely, all by yourself." Since there were only three other men in a room designed to accommodate two hundred fifty at a pinch, this could be said of any of the four. She chose to ignore that. "Yes, please do sit down," she said.

"I've been hoping I'd run into you. After the other day . . . I owe you an apology."

"Why?" Eyes listless, hands slightly shaking. She looked up at him. "You didn't believe me, so it doesn't matter."

"But I do, now." He leaned toward her, speaking quietly, "I have a patient on my level, a girl. Nine years old, abandoned with her brother. She has polio."

Natalie's face sharpened. "When was she admitted?"

"City patrol brought her in yesterday."

"Where is she now? Can we run some tests on her?"

Harry sighed, defeated. "No. They transferred her out this afternoon. She was on breathing assist then."

"Do you know where?"

"No. It was not put on the authorization card."

Her hands were shaking in earnest now. Her faded green eyes were nerve-bright. "It's going to get worse. It's going to get worse so fast," she said softly, quickly. "Dave Lillijanthal got a tetanus. A real one. They can't say this is a mutant virus."

"How old?"

"This one is an adult, late twenties. They've got him in the decompression chamber."

Harry stared at her. "You know what's going on, don't you? Someone has told you what's happening."

"Mark did."

"Then why the hell . . ." He made an effort to quiet his voice; this was no time to give away their conversation. "Why don't you tell people? Why aren't you doing something about it?"

For the first time she looked ashamed. "Because I can't! If I say what I know, who would believe me? The best known doctors in the city say I'm just an hysterical woman who can't adjust to the loss of a child."

The room grew hushed. One of the three other men rose and left the cafeteria.

"That is what they'll do if I speak out. And that would mean I'd have to stop practicing. I can't do that!" In her intensity she, too, leaned forward. "They're going to need doctors so much . . . so soon."

"What is happening?" Harry pleaded.

For an answer she shook her head quickly. "Not here." She glanced furtively at the wall clock. "It's one-twenty. Do you have to be on the floor just now?"

"Not right now. I'm supposed to be on call at two-thirty."

She closed her eyes and sagged. "Can you leave the hospital for a few minutes?"

"Yes," he said in some confusion. "I suppose I can."

"Good. I don't want to talk here." She rose, the noff untouched. "You didn't have to. Kind, though," she mused, looking at the brown liquid. His low laugh flustered her. "Come on, then," she said brusquely.

The park across from the hospital was darkly secluded but was unsafe after dark. Natalie surprised Harry by walking straight toward it, veering off at the last minute to the walk that bordered the lake. She walked quickly, as if afraid to reveal herself, but once the bow of the lake

concealed them from the hospital and the traffic on the approach arterial she slowed down. The night was cool for spring and the flowers were still strong enough to cover the grimy city air with a sweetness as elusive as it was touching.

"Here." She hurried toward a bench. "We can talk here. It's not the park, but they can't see us here."

"You're really frightened, aren't you?" he wondered. "Is it that bad?"

A stricken look crossed her face before she answered. "Yes. Oh, yes. It is that bad." She stopped, ducked her head, and fumbled with her scarf tucked in the pocket of the hospital whites.

"It's so bad. What they've done . . . I ran some tests down in Mark's lab before Phillip . . . got sick. Checking on my first patients. I thought they had the old diseases. The lab was closed—Mark was . . . busy."

She remembered hiding in a lab station when her husband and his girl friend returned suddenly to his central lab for privacy. "I checked out the samples. It was like a textbook, the same reactions. I thought it was vaccine failure. I went back to the lab again. Into storage . . ."

She looked at him at last. "The vaccines . . . they're about one third of them useless. They've been destroyed in random batches. One third of all the vaccines produced. For everything."

She pushed a stray hair off her brow. "The program started about five years ago. I found that out going through Mark's papers . . . before I left him."

"He knows about it?"

"Oh, yes. He thinks it's a great idea. Fair—this way no one knows who gets what, and after all, only one third are placebos. There's good chance that you're fully protected." The angry sarcasm in her voice gave way to despair. "And I can't do anything!"

They were silent for several minutes. "How many have you treated so far?" Harry asked.

"Children? Thirty-seven. Not so many since they trans-

ferred my floor partner to County Central. They're trying to keep me off the cases."

"I've had seventeen, in three weeks."

In a faraway voice she asked, "I wonder how many cases there are now? Really?"

"Justin would know."

"Justin would lie."

"What if we tell Parkenson?"

"He knows."

Again silence.

"Ian says it's better than battered children—that this is the natural way."

"Maybe he's right," Harry said, "but I can't accept it. Not watching them die."

"Ian says they're being abandoned anyway. That they are being crowded out of existence. And this is *fair!*"

Harry said nothing.

"I watched him take care of some kids about a month ago. One lost a leg; the other was too far gone—both tibia splintered, a shoulder dislocated. The parents might be fined."

"Then you agree with Ian?" Harry asked, incredulous.

"Not about the vaccine. But sometimes I wonder . . . what are we saving them for?"

Peter Justin was trimming his nails. Anyone who knew him would recognize this as symptomatic of discomfort. He brushed the clipping into the wasteshoot with an oddly fussy gesture. When he looked up again, a medium height blond man towered over him.

"I want some information," Harry said. "I want it now and I want it correct."

"What about?" Justin asked, playing for time. "Why are you here, Harry?"

"You know why I'm here!" he exploded.

Justin made a second attempt at urbanity. "If it's about those children . . ."

"Can it! How many have been through this hospital and what did they die of? The real figures, Justin!"

Justin sighed. "I don't need the figures. In the last two months, three hundred thirty-two with diphtheria, fifty-six with smallpox, ninety-one with polio, three with tetanus, eighteen with TB, one hundred sixty-nine with meningitis. There are a few others—perhaps half a dozen with measles."

"In total, or fatalities?" Harry demanded, brows furrowed in concentration.

"Fatalities. The figures for adults aren't that high—I think the total is around four hundred in all." He looked pleadingly at Harry. "Something had to be done. You know what conditions are—there was no other way, Harry."

"Sweet Jesus, that's over a thousand! This hospital alone, over a thousand."

"County Central is running slightly higher. Inner City is lower on diphtheria."

"They're higher on abuse!" Harry snapped. He had done his first internship there. He had seen the way the children were treated. His first patient had been a five year old with the burn from a steam iron on his back. That was over ten years ago. "Besides, Inner City, they don't bring children to the hospital except to die. The figures there wouldn't be accurate."

Peter Justin looked away uneasily. "It isn't going well. There are too many—it's too early for so many." He adjusted his handsome face carefully. "But we mustn't be too concerned."

"Why? It's not according to your predicted curve? How shocking." He gave a sardonic bark that was intended as a laugh. Justin shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "All figured out in advance, is it, like the Tolerable Losses tables in the Pentagon?" He rounded on Justin, his clenched hands shaking. "I hope you bloody fools get your asses royally burned for this!"

Justin favored him with the travesty of a smile. "Of

course we anticipated certain variables. The figures are high, yes—but it is like a war, don't you see? Only an irresponsible leader would not allow for losses. Battles are won that way."

"You don't know what you've started, do you? You haven't been down on the floor in a long time, Peter. You don't know what it's like down there. I just hope you live long enough to see what your filthy charts have done!" He slammed out the door.

He was heading for the central admissions desk.

The pale-haired girl at the desk balked at his order. "But doctor, I can't give out that information without authorization from one of the administrators. Those are the regulations."

"The regulations have just changed. I want the admit records for the last twenty-four hours. Especially pediatrics. Young kids with 'mutant virus' diagnoses and those suffering from exposure. And I want it now."

"Doctor, you haven't got the required signatures—"

"This last time I repeat." He smiled, unpleasantly. "Then I am coming into your office. I will take all your records, every last one. Then I will walk down to the storage computer with a large magnet in my pocket. May I have those records, please?"

The girl was visibly frightened as she went into her office. When she came back with the printout sheets she shoved them to Harry, sullen-faced. "Here. Take them. I'll lose my job if Dr. Justin ever finds out."

Harry gave her a fierce wink. "No way, child. You're going to be here quite a while; a lot longer than you think."

With this assurance, he went on down the hall.

"Dr. Lebbreau, paging Dr. Lebbreau. Report to level nine, please. Dr. Lebbreau to level nine."

Natalie turned as she heard the paging call. Her patient smiled. "A call for you, Nat." She was into middle

age and had been in the hospital since the holidays, recovering from three knife wounds. She knew that the prognosis was good, and largely due to Natalie. The paralysis would be partial instead of total as first feared.

The paging was repeated.

"You'd better go, Nat," Mrs. Dwyer smiled kindly.

"Yes." She frowned slightly. "I'd better. If you don't mind, I'll send Carol in to finish this up. She's on the floor now and you've had her before."

"No rush, Nat. I'll be here yet awhile."

By the time she stepped from the elevator on level nine Natalie's frown had deepened. She was developing a defense in her mind, in case the paging meant that the administration was aware of her talks with Harry Smith. She knew if that had happened that they were both in serious trouble and faced dismissal. She glanced about nervously for Justin or Wrexler. Even Mark might be there.

"Good. I'm glad you were fast." It was Harry who stepped up to her.

She looks better, not so frightened. Harry thought. *Maybe we can weather this.* He saw her stand straighter for him. There was purpose in her expression now, replacing the depression.

He hesitated, and then took her arm as they started down the hall. "I've been talking to Justin and I've got some figures out of him."

"Justin?" Her straight brows drew together again. "Justin? Have you seen him?"

"Yes." He guided her to the empty solarium, pushed open the door and shoved her into the dark sunroom. "It's much worse than we guessed. There have been roughly eleven hundred fatalities in the last two months at this hospital alone. County Central is running higher, Inner City a bit lower."

She was badly shocked. "Eleven hundred! I thought it wasn't much above five hundred . . . Just in two months?"

"Natalie, it's just getting started. That crew of damned idiots has really made a mare's nest this time." He did not wait for her response. "We've got to make some changes, and quickly. All the computers have to be re-programmed to recognize 'extinct' diseases. That's where a lot of the trouble is coming from, the diagnosis end. The computers don't recognize diphtheria and smallpox because diphtheria and smallpox were wiped out years ago, so they come up with the 'mutant virus' or 'modified bacterial infection' and our hands are tied. We've got to get some doctors who are willing to fight this thing."

"Yes," she nodded, her breathing quickened. "We will need help."

"Is there anyone on your service?"

She thought briefly. "Dave Lillijanthal. He'll be willing, I think. Gil would, if he were . . . Gil's my old partner," she explained. "He's been transferred. I think we can get Stan Kooznetz; he's terribly young but he's a good doctor. So is Lisa Skyie. She isn't very strong, though, not a lot of stamina. Carol Mendosa's tough. She's got a mind like an Inquisitor after heretics and looks like a Botticelli angel. She'll work till it kills her."

"Right. I can get Patman and Divanello in pediatric service, maybe about ten more. If we work hard we might even be ready for the first wave when it comes."

She sat up suddenly. "What about us? We might not be immune either."

Harry whistled softly. "Good girl. I hadn't thought of that. But of course, that's just what they'd do. Justin kept saying that this has to be fair. As soon as we get organized we'll vaccinate everyone for everything. If we start coming down with the bugs we won't be of any use at all."

"And if there are mutant strains?"

He had thought of the possibility earlier and was afraid. "We take our chances along with everyone else." More than everyone, he admitted. They would all be working close to the diseases.

"How long do we have until the new ones crop up?" From the way she asked the worry was an old one with her. She went to the east window and looked out toward Inner City. "It's going to show up there first. We should make some plans to run random tests on the admits."

"I think you're right about Inner City. And the abandoned children. It's hard to tell where they come from." He narrowed his eyes at the lights in the distance. "If we can get the city patrol to enforce quarantines, we might be able to confine the worst of it in pockets. And some of the bugs respond to diseases around them. We'll have to keep them separate. Where are we going to get the bed space?"

"I don't know." She sighed.

"That will be one more graph for Justin."

Suddenly Natalie turned to him, her back tense and her face anxious. "This isn't the same thing as graph paper! What if the administration won't help us?"

"We have enough to worry about without thinking up what-ifs."

"There's not any reason to think they will help us. And there's so much at stake. Harry, what if they turn us out?"

"They can't turn us out. They need us right now or the initiative will be lost. They wouldn't dare," he said.

The notice had been up for an hour before Harry saw it at noon the next day:

The following doctors are relieved of service in this hospital. Dismissal for cause. You are requested to leave the premises before midnight this date, 3-29-87.

Under the authorization stamp were the scrawled signatures of Peter Justin and Thomas Wrexler. The appended list of names was long; accompanying Harry and

Natalie were most of those they had counted on to aid their program of survival.

"What kind of crap is this?" Harry demanded, slapping a torn copy of the notice onto Jim Braemoore's desk.

"Told you what would happen if you kept on, Harry. Didn't want it to happen, myself, but you insisted. Thought for a while there you might see sense."

"What are you talking about? I want to see Wrexler." Harry stormed toward the door.

"He won't see you. Not what he wanted but you gave him no choice." Jim smiled sympathetically. "Can't say I wouldn't have done the same thing myself, years ago. I admire your stand, Harry. Good to know there're doctors like you left. Thought they'd vanished."

Harry gave him a puzzled look, still breathing hard. "Jim, don't you know what they're doing? Doesn't it bother you at all?"

"Thinning down the herd, that's it. Culling the weak ones. A couple of months, moderate epidemic, relieve the pressure for a bit. We need the relief."

With all the control at his command, Harry began, as if to a small child. "Jim, one third of all vaccines are useless. One third! They have been for about five years. This isn't just a bad run of flu, Jim, this is a major one. We aren't talking about just one disease—not just a smallpox epidemic or a cholera epidemic or a meningitis epidemic. This will be the granddaddy of all epidemics, with something for everyone!"

"There's enough vaccines stockpiled," Braemoore responded. "We can stop it if it gets out of hand. It won't be like what you've said at all. Couldn't do that, Harry."

"But it is."

Jim spread out his hand to stop him. "Tell you what, Harry, you get your kit and go along home. I'll have a word with Wrexler in the morning. You'll be back here in no time, that's the ticket."

"There isn't time. . . ."

Jim buzzed for the door; it opened. "Glad you came to me, Harry. Knew we could sort things out if you did. We'll just wait until the worst blows over and then Wrexler'll have you back. Shouldn't be more than a couple of months. And don't let things like this bother you. It isn't natural."

And he closed the door.

Nine days later, when martial law had been declared and the newscasts were full of the mutant virus epidemic in the city, Harry and Natalie were having lunch in his flat. She had been confined to his quarters for the duration of the emergency. There was smallpox in her building complex.

They knew that they were being monitored.

"I wish we could have the windows open," Natalie said wistfully. "I miss the smell of spring." The sunshine reflected off the white plastic counters and metal sink, making the small room shine.

"The smell is different this year."

They fell silent.

After a while he began to hum. It was just a nursery rhyme that every child knows:

"Ring around the rosie
Pocket full of posie
Ashes, ashes, all fall down."

"Shut up!" she yelled at him.

"Hum? What for?"

"Don't you know what that is?"

"What's wrong with a nursery rhyme?" He rose and came around behind her.

She pushed his hand away from her shoulder. "It's the Plague rhyme. It's about the Black Death."

Her voice was flat, all anger gone from it. "I'm sorry I snapped at you."

Harry made an effort to change the subject. "I wonder if they'll call us back?"

If there were anyone to call them back. He had heard that both Braemoore and Wrexler were gone.

"It's like being on a sinking ship with a hundred other people and two leaky lifeboats, isn't it? Do you think we'll make it?"

"Don't talk that way." He went to pull the blind down.

"Knowing people . . ." She went on as if she had not heard him. ". . . they'll trample each other to death, or hack the boats to pieces . . ."

"Natalie, stop it!" He was about to turn on her, but there was a tap at the window. His flat was four floors above ground level and the window difficult to reach. Cautiously he looked around.

"What is it?" Natalie asked from the table.

"I don't know. I thought I heard—there it is again." He looked around more carefully, edging the window open.

Twenty feet beyond the window, on the narrow service landing, perched a twelve-year-old girl. One hand was filled with gravel; the other hand had two fingers stuck into her nose. "You the doctor?" she whispered.

"Both of us," Harry answered.

"Can you come quick? Just two floors down. My sister is sick."

Harry frowned. "What about your mother? Can't she get a doctor?"

"They left," the girl answered simply. "Mom and Pop both. The hospital doesn't answer. I tried that first."

"Do your mother and father work?" asked Natalie who had joined Harry at the window.

"Nope. Left. For good. Ces'lie's real sick. Can you come?" She thought something over. "Can't go out the door. There are cops watching it. But if you crawl along the ledge there . . ." She pointed to the ledge beneath the window.

"I don't think—" Harry began.

"I can," Natalie interrupted. "You'd never make it,

Harry; not along that. Get my bag for me, will you?"

He would have protested but the girl put in. "Yeah, she's right. You're too big."

As Harry raised surprised eyebrows Natalie giggled and said, "There, you see?"

He looked down at her in exasperation. He said, "Okay. I'll get the bag. But be careful."

"I will," she promised.

When he got back from the bedroom she had buttoned on the white hospital oversmock that she had worn the first time she saw him. The slacks she had on looked old but they were sturdy. She smiled when she saw him. "While I'm gone you're going to have to do something to make them think I'm still here. Unless this is very serious I'll be back before too long. If the girl is really sick, I'll call Lisa Skyie. She's still on the staff and can arrange for the child to be picked up."

"Yes," he said to her.

"Now wait until I get out the window." She climbed onto the drainboard. "I'll have to get a foothold before I can handle the bag." She began to lower herself gingerly out of the window.

Suddenly he was filled with concern for her. "You don't have to go," he told her abruptly.

The washed-out green of her eyes softened. "Someone has to," she said. "Just save me a place in the lifeboat."

And then she was onto the ledge, crawling toward the girl who crouched, waiting to lead her to her sister.

As the slant of the sun moved across the table he waited, wondering if Natalie knew how utterly they were beaten. He drank coffee and when that gave out, water. She would sneak home, ready to answer the next cry for help . . . and would go on answering them until she died. Eventually he knew he would have to help her. And they would lose. It was inevitable: attempts to stop it now were ludicrous. No one could oppose death on a scale like this. Natalie was just a fool to try.

God, but he was proud of her . . . !

Honor among thieves may come hard . . . but it can come.

VOOREMP: SPY

Miriam Allen deFord

Vooremp arrived on Terra in the same interstellar ship as the delegate and his staff from the newly federated Altair IV. There was the usual crowd to gape at them, but it wasn't as good a show as was provided by some other delegations to the Interplanetary Council. Aside from the hairlessness and the occipital eye, the Altairians looked just like Terrans. Vooremp himself was small and chubby.

As soon as the formalities were over the delegate and his staff proceeded to the house they had leased for headquarters. Vooremp did not follow them; he knew he would be more at ease among his own colleagues.

He presented himself at the Administration Office, and to the Terran at the information desk he said cheerfully in his newly acquired Terranglian: "Please, where register as spy?"

The Terran stared at him. Vooremp was embarrassed. Wasn't his Terranglian good enough, after all his practice? He tried again.

"Am Vooremp, appointed spy from Governak—what you call Altair IV," he explained, "and want to know where register, and where is club to meet other spies from federated planets."

It was the Terran's turn to be embarrassed.

"Oh, sorry," he apologized. "I'm afraid you've got the

wrong word. You mean you're a member of the Altairian delegation. You go—"

"No, no." Vooremp was becoming impatient. "Am spy, officially appointed. To find out what is other planets plotting, and report back to mine. Was spy sixteen years other governments my sector, now promoted to Terra because Governak new member Interplanetary Council."

Unobtrusively the Terran touched a button. Suddenly Vooremp found himself surrounded by armed roboguards. Startled, he took a step back, and was immediately immobilized in a force-net.

"To Security," the Terran ordered. His voice was shaking.

Utterly bewildered, Vooremp was hustled out of the office, down a corridor, up a whoosh-whoosh, down another corridor, and into another office, where a large scaly personage—probably from one of the outer Vegan planets—sat behind a massive desk and gazed at him coldly with his huge Cyclopean eye.

"You are the Altairian who brazenly confessed that you are a spy?" he rumbled.

"Confessed?" said Vooremp, puzzled. "I did not confess. I asserted."

The Security executive let out a kind of anguished scream of horror. It made the windows rattle.

"In all my years in office," he said cuttingly, "I have never heard anything to equal this! Very well, you *asserted*. Your delegate has barely arrived, he has not yet taken his seat in the Council, and you openly announce he has brought with him a confessed secret agent!

"Take him away," he ordered the roboguards. "Deliver him to the warden of the Interplanetary Maximum Security Institution. If I have anything to do with it, he will be shot at sunrise."

"Wait! Wait!" cried Vooremp frantically. "There is here awful mistake. Secret agent, what is that? Term unknown. If I used wrong word, forgive ignorance of noble language. Am merely accredited professional spy."

The Security officer took a long breath. With a gesture

he stopped the guard as Vooremp, unable to struggle, had been herded almost to the door.

"I am not an unreasonable person," he said in tones that dared the listener to disbelieve appearances. "I realize there may be semantic difficulties when a new affiliate joins the Council. No," he added to the guard, "don't release him. He can talk from where he stands.

"Now, you—what is your name?"

"Vooremp."

"So, Vooremp, tell me exactly what you understand a spy to be?"

"A spy," Vooremp answered, quoting conscientiously from the Dedicatory Statement he had learned sixteen years before, "is appointed by his government to go abroad to other planets in the interest of his own. There he endeavors to ascertain any plots, plans, or inimical moves and to report them back. He associates also with spies of other planets in the one to which he is assigned, so that they can exchange information of value to one another."

He suddenly realized he was speaking in Governakan, and hastily translated into his stumbling Terranglian. The executive frowned—at least he seemed to be frowning: it was hard to tell, with all those scales.

"You mean, when you are assigned to another planet, you openly declare your purpose and are allowed to remain on those terms?"

"Why, of course. How else prevent trouble between governments? Every planet knows its spies from others there exchanging information, so is always preventing aggression everywhere."

An unpleasant thought struck him.

"Is not so throughout Galaxy?" he inquired anxiously. "Have served always in small sector; never until now, with affiliation, Governak has gone beyond. Assignment to Terra great honor—here suppose spies from all planets, Governak too must be represented.

"Terra also will send spy to Governak, no? If can meet

him before he goes, be glad give him introduction our Spy Club there."

The Security officer stared at him, mouth agape.

"Never in all my born days!" he sputtered. "Of all the — If the Assembly had ever dreamed—tell me something: do any of the planets in the sector where you maintain this incredible network already belong to the Interplanetary Council?"

"No," said Vooremp regretfully. "All small, all poor. Governak is first. Then maybe, they hope, Governak bring them in too."

"Over Security's dead body!" roared the Vegan. "This is something that must be taken up with higher authority at once, so that before your delegate takes his seat he may be barred.

"Take him away," he instructed the guard. "But under the circumstances," he added to the trembling Vooremp, "I shall rescind—or postpone—an order for your execution. You will be kept in protective custody until we have made a full investigation.

"If you are telling the truth, I may not have you executed." A hint of frosty amiability crept into the rumbling voice, and what Vooremp could swear was a glint of calculation shone in the menacing eye. "You may only be deported." The glint grew stronger. "Or if we decide not to disaffiliate your outfit after all, it might even be possible to allow you to remain here, under certain conditions."

"What conditions?" asked Vooremp warily. Was the officer going to propose that he inform on his own planet?

"We'll discuss that later . . . when and if." The glance was icy again. "Take him away."

Vooremp had always been an honorable and honored spy; it was humiliating to be thrown into even the most modern and comfortable cell as if he were a criminal. But being philosophical by nature, he made the best of

things. He would have liked to keep his hand in by exchanging grapevine news with his fellow-inmates, as he had learned by video was the custom in Terran prisons, but he was kept incommunicado, with his meals brought to him, and he took his daily exercise alone (but roboguarded) in the empty yard.

He couldn't for the life of him see what all the fuss was about. As he had tried to indicate to Security, for centuries his home planet and its neighbors had kept the peace by the sensible, practical method of openly infiltrating one another with spies. The knowledge that the spies were there, that they all knew one another and helped one another out, was an absolute guarantee of peaceful relations. There was even a professional association of spies which would have been called a union if they had not all been government employees, and their clubhouse on each planet had the status of a diplomatic residence. There had been great excitement when federation with IC had opened up a wonderful new territory, and intense rivalry for the appointment. Vooremp had regretted having to leave the friendly company of his colleagues from other planets of the sector, but the prestige and promotion outweighed the regret. Now he wished dismally that someone else had been chosen. He could not believe they would actually kill him—but if he had to go back in disgrace as a deportee he could never hold his head up again. He was no longer young, and he knew no other profession. And if by his doing Governak was disaffiliated from IC, his punishment might be appalling.

He recalled the calculating gleam in the Security officer's single eye. What could it have meant?

Well, he'd find out soon, probably. Meanwhile he made himself as comfortable as he could, and tried to become accustomed to the odd food on this planet. Presumably he would be tried or interrogated some day. Another peculiar thing: at home they had the trial first and the imprisonment later. Here, apparently, it was the other way round.

The roboguards came for him after about a week in his cell and conducted him to another office. This time the Security officer was a Terran, to Vooremp's relief—he hadn't been happy with that one-eyed reptilian. He felt much more at ease with a Terran, though this was a ferocious one, with a beak of a nose and sharp blue eyes.

Quite obviously he had had a record of the earlier interview. "Interesting system you people seem to have," he began without preliminaries. "Do you mean that all the planets you know about have aliens planted, openly spying on them for their own governments?"

"All I know, yes."

"Well, we don't—as you've already learned, I imagine!"

"You mean the Interplanetary Council?"

"IC has *no* spies, open or secret. I was talking about my own planet—Terra."

"Good!" Vooremp interposed, beaming. "Not sent here to spy on IC—just on Terra!"

The Security officer looked as if he were going to explode. He rose slowly to his feet, his fists clenched, he swallowed visibly, and just as slowly sat down again.

"Do you mean that you have the ineffable nerve to tell me—"

"No understand word 'ineffable'; sorry, not in my word-tape. But yes, plenty nerve—is why I was appointed this high office."

The Terran just sat there, breathing hard.

"In the days of my ancestors," he gritted, "by this time you'd have been beaten to a bloody pulp."

"Every civilization has its barbarian ancestors," Vooremp replied kindly—then realized that he was speaking in Governakan again and shut up. The Security officer wasn't listening anyway. He was struggling for self-control, and finally achieved it.

"But we, fortunately for you," he muttered, "deal with our problems on the plane of reason and calm discussion. So—"

Suddenly an inspiration came to Vooremp.

"Officer who talk to me first," he remarked casually, "Him from Vega planet . . ."

"What about him?" asked the Terran sharply. "My first assistant."

He was right—the Terran was the Vegan's superior in office. Superiors are always wary of ambitious subordinates, and rightly so.

Careful, now, Vooremp: this was delicate. Was the Security Chief more loyal to the Interplanetary Council, to his home planet—or to his own welfare?

"I was wonder," he murmured, "what he mean when he say perhaps I not be sent back, perhaps here he find for me some use . . ."

Vooremp let his voice trail away. There was a long silence.

"Take him back," commanded the Security officer abruptly. As Vooremp left between his guards he glanced behind him and saw that the Terran's hands were trembling.

In the next three days Vooremp had two visitors in his cell. The first was the one-eyed reptilian from Vega.

"What have you been saying to the Chief about me?" he roared.

"Me?" said Vooremp mildly. "Nothing."

"I won't have you deported, you scum; I'll have you boiled in oil! Now I've been accused by him of dealing with a foreign spy!"

"We deal?" Vooremp was innocence itself. "When? How?"

The Vegan ignored this. He glared menacingly at Vooremp and lowered his grating voice to a whisper.

"There's only one way you can get yourself out of this mess, you lousy Altairian."

"Oh, I be glad! What I do?"

The Vegan looked all around—which involved turning himself all around too, for his neck wasn't very flexible. Nothing was in sight but a couple of roboguards, who could hear only what they were intended to hear.

"If I level with you, will you give me your word of honor, or whatever stands for that in the half-civilized place you come from, to keep it strictly to yourself?"

"Resent aspersion on my planet," Vooremp replied stiffly. "More civilized as lizards from Vega. But let that pass—*too* civilized, me, to make issue. I am trained spy. Never repeat what told in secret—except to own government."

"You won't want to repeat *this* to your government." The Security officer grinned, revealing his very unpleasant greenish teeth. "As a matter of fact, your own delegate has repudiated you."

"Repudiated?"

"We informed him that you were *persona non grata* here, and he said O.K., send you home, that they had no need of spies on IC."

"Not sent here to spy on IC, he knows that," said Vooremp indignantly. "Here to spy only on Terra."

"And," the Vegan went on inexorably, "your delegate said that now he realized the importance of Terra in IC, he felt it would be a breach of hospitality to plant any spies here at all—just as the other members have felt in the past."

Vooremp stared at him with his two front eyes.

"You mean," he stammered in dismay, "that I am *only* spy, from anywhere, on Terra, just because IC headquarters here?"

"Well, between you and me—" the Vegan's voice dropped conspiratorially—"let's say you would have been the only *open* spy. That's where you made your mistake, and that's what's got you into all this trouble. We're all loyal members of IC, of course, but just because Terra has a dominant place in it, or because the official headquarters are here—and we all help pay for the upkeep, after all—is no reason for ignoring the interests of our own home planets—as long as we keep it all strictly on the q.t. Which is where *you* fell down."

"Governakians *honorable* spies," said Vooremp stubbornly.

"Contradiction in terms," the Vegan replied airily. "Well, that's neither here nor there in view of your present circumstances. Let's get down to cases.

"In confidence, your deportation order has already been signed. You're to go back home in disgrace on the next stellar ship headed for your sector."

Vooremp was deeply angry. How polite his delegate had been on the way over! And now he was willing to throw a duly appointed spy overboard just to curry favor with ICI!

"But," the Security officer went on, "as I told you before, there is a possible way to let you stay here—under certain conditions."

This time Vooremp was beyond asking what the conditions were. His visitor continued.

"You'd have to go on the ship, of course. But I might manage to have you taken off again secretly at the Lunar Stop and smuggled back here—if you agree to my proposal."

An aggrieved whine crept into his tone.

"There's really no way a deserving representative of another planet can out-manuever the Terran power in IC," he said. "And in the same pattern, the best staff positions go to Terrans, like that blowhard who interviewed you, and who to my misfortune is my own Chief. In all justice, I should have got his job. Instead, I'm subject to his tantrums and suspicions and I have to take it in silence.

"Why—" he suddenly glowered at Vooremp. "Why, you little pipsqueak, now he accuses me of slandering him to an alien prisoner—you! He accuses me of suggesting a deal with you in private, going over his head. As if I would ever do a thing like that!"

Then just what are you doing? Vooremp reflected, but discreetly he made no reply.

"So, just to show him . . ."

The Vegan stood up to his full enormous altitude and snorted through his expansive nostrils.

"I'll hoist him with his own petard, as one of their own

ancient poets put it," he exclaimed. "I'll use *you* to get the goods on him and have him ousted. I know, just from knowing *him*, that there's plenty of stuff to be found to his discredit. What do you say? Or would you rather be sent back home with the statement that your outrageous actions jeopardized the acceptance of your planet by the IC? Because that's the way the deportation order reads."

"What would I have to do?" Vooremp asked. He reminded himself that veteran spies have forgotten the meaning of fear.

"It's very simple. We'll disguise you a little—hide your non-Terran characteristics, give you a wig and all that—coach you in Terranglian, change your name, give you a cover story—and you'll act as my own private, personal spy, paid out of my own not inconsiderable fortune, solely and simply to ferret out the misdoings of that misbegotten high muckymuck of a Terran and get me the facts to use to oust him and put me in his place as his rightful successor."

"I am government spy, not private detective," Vooremp said coldly. It was a professional insult. But his brain was working overtime to take advantage of this lucky opportunity. He could work at the same time at his legitimate job, for which he had been sent to Terra, and perform thereby such prodigies of brilliant spymanship that his own government would overwhelm him with acclamation and honors. Never in his long experience had he worked except by the easy-going pooling of information in the planetary Spy Clubs, where nothing was secret that did not affect one's own planet; but now he would show them how he, singlehanded, could outdo all the secretive spies of these other backward planets.

So he went on smoothly, "Slur not intended, am sure. How soon I must tell you my decision?"

"I can't see why you need any time—it's an either-or proposition. But there isn't a starship leaving for a week. I'll come back here again three days from now, this same time, and we'll arrange the details."

He summoned the roboguards and departed.

Vooremp had asked for time for a good reason. What he expected happened the very next day. The Security Chief came to see him.

He did no beating about the bush. He merely said peremptorily:

"We have decided to deport you. The Crime Committee of IC has considered your case and ruled that you have technically broken no law, but that you are an undesirable alien, so we are sending you back with a note of censure.

"It is a bad mark for your delegate, just as you people are entering IC, and he is very much annoyed. He authorized me to tell you that he will positively do nothing to make things easier for you.

"However, I was impressed, personally, by your intelligence at our interview. So I am prepared to circumvent formal rules a little and offer you an alternative. I shall put it briefly.

"Thanks to absurd protocol, I cannot hire or fire my own staff at the official level. Consequently, I am burdened with an incompetent and hostile first assistant—that Vegan who saw you first, and concerning whose outrageous hints and suggestions you very properly informed me—not that he would actually have the power to do anything to help you. When I reproached him with it, he was insolent to me—and, I may add, most abusive of you."

Vooremp said nothing.

"The only way I can get rid of that Vegan monster—I take that adjective back; we're all equal under the IC agreement, however superior some races may be by nature, and he'd be the same kind of scoundrel if he were a Terran—is by getting something on him—something really bad. Then I could have him kicked out and sent back home thoroughly discredited.

"As I say, your aptitude in your chosen profession—however oddly it seems to function in your part of the Galaxy—impressed me very favorably. I think you're what I've been looking for.

"If I avert, or even better, camouflage your sentence, will you then become my personal agent, with the solitary duty of finding grounds for me to throw off that incubus the authorities have loaded me with? Of course you would have to give me your word to do *no* spying for your government against Terra, but I'd see you were well recompensed financially. Say yes or no."

"Can't say yes or no like instant mind of quick-thinking Terran," said Vooremp in his finest display of high espionage. "Must think deeply, ponder, meditate."

"All right," growled the Security Chief rudely. "You don't have to recite the thesaurus. But time is of the essence—you're due to be shipped out within the week. How long do you need?"

"Maybe two days from now?" suggested Vooremp suavely. "About this hour?"

He was in luck. They did not meet at the prison door or inside it; the first assistant arrived five minutes before his superior. Hoping for what did happen, Vooremp stalled for those few minutes, evading an answer to the Vegan's demand for his decision. He seated his visitor on the bed and stood facing him with his back to the barred door, his rear eye anxiously watching the corridor. As soon as he saw the Terran approaching with his robo-guards, he stepped courteously to the wall so that his second caller might be ushered in.

There was a delicious moment when the two simply glared at each other, beyond speech. And the speech, when it did come, was mere incoherent sputtering.

"Gentlemen," said Vooremp mildly, "this proper language before alien prisoner?"

The noise stopped abruptly. The Terran collapsed on the bed, panting. The Vegan, who had jumped up from it, turned to summon the guards and leave. Vooremp adroitly stepped between him and the door.

"No," he announced. "Will not do. Must discuss new situation now."

"What is there to discuss?" the first assistant groaned.

"All right, sir," he said to his superior, "You win. I'll send in my resignation at once."

"No, no," Vooremp repeated before the Terran could speak. "Consider. He caught you dealing private with me—I suppose illegal. You caught him doing same—also illegal. Nobody resign. Come to agreement."

"What agreement?" asked the Vegan feebly. The Terran looked up, a new light of calculation in his eyes. Vooremp could guess what was going on in that agile mind, so much nearer to his own than was the inscrutable reptilian's. The Security Chief cleared his throat.

"That makes sense, Vaxbst," he said. It was the first time Vooremp had heard the name of either of them.

"I don't know how you did it," he went on with a severe glance at the Governakian spy, "but we both walked into the trap. I don't know the details of what Vaxbst offered you, but I dare say it was much the same as I did."

"Quite much the same," Vooremp agreed.

"In other words, we've both laid ourselves open to dismissal by IC—we might as well face it. What are your terms for absolute silence on the subject forever?"

Vooremp had had two days to figure it out and rehearse it in the best Terranglian he could muster.

"Proves," he said amiably, "that Governakian method safest for all, including governments spied on. Open spying, openly arrived at—not my words, adapted from ancient Terran tape."

"Don't forget," the Vegan rumbled, recovering, "IC has already informed your delegate you're not wanted here."

"Oh, that," remarked Vooremp carelessly. "Delegate my cousin—maybe that why, modestly, I get appointment. You accept my terms, I save IC much trouble. I know how Governakian mind work; you don't. You tell them, get rid of Vooremp—oh, yes, they do it: not so nice for me. But that because Governak just enter IC, must swallow insult till formal seating. But they never forget. Soon as feel established, plan revenge. From then

on, Governak enemy of Terra, work to undermine influence, block every Terran move. Confusion, obstacles, chaos—great blow to IC. Governakians very vengeful people.

"So now you both go to Secretary General, urgent, confidential meeting. Each give the other credit for discovery effect my deportation order would have. Tell him entire sector of Galaxy waiting to join IC, depending on treatment given Governak, first from Altairian region. Tell him absolutely necessary reverse decision, so inform our delegate, with apologies.

"Secretary General is Terran. All equal in IC, but each by nature has interests of own planet first in heart. Also, responsibility for welfare whole IC rests on him. Make it strong. You will persuade him. You *must*—alternative is public disclosure, soon as I reach home, result in disgrace and ruin to you both."

He smiled sweetly.

"Little embarrassment for you now, or future shame—which you prefer? Little humiliation for IC now, or future destruction IC—which Secretary General prefer?"

The Security Chief nodded almost imperceptibly. His first assistant sighed and shrugged his scaly shoulders.

"No use bluffing," the Terran said gruffly. "You've got us where you wanted us. All right, we'll try."

"You will succeed," Vooremp answered politely. "I stake career on it."

"Yes, what about your career? I assume that's part of your demands. What happens if we do manage to have the deportation order reversed?"

Vooremp raised the hairless ridges that served him as eyebrows in front.

"Then I do my job as appointed," he said. "Everybody know by now I am Governak spy, so could not hide it if wished, which don't. I am open spy, so secret spies become nervous: who spies on them? might be anybody, afraid now every informant may be my informant too. Soon one planet switches over to Governak system, then another, then all.

"I have the honor," he concluded simply, "introduce Governak open spy system into new sector Galaxy. Great relief and help in the end to IC. Insures universal peace, as is universal peace among planets my region. My name go down in history of my planet—Vooremp, honored spy."

The Security Chief looked flustered.

"Er . . . I'm afraid you'll have to stay here in prison till we put this over . . ."

"If we do," the first assistant growled.

"We will, you—" The Terran remembered suddenly that from now on they must be on friendly terms for their own safety. He altered his tone hastily. "I'm sure I shall be able to, with your help, Vaxbst. As I was saying, Vooremp, if you don't mind, we'll have to keep you here till then. As soon as the reversal is announced, we'll both come personally to release you, and bring along a full complement of communications representatives to give it full publicity. Are you comfortable here?"

"Oh, perfect," said Vooremp amiably. "I wait."

Smiling, he watched them go. He closed his rear eye in a slow, self-approving wink. As soon as he was free and settled, he thought dreamily, he must begin planning for a Spy Club here to take in all the local agents once they had adopted the Governak system. Naturally they would elect him as their first president.

His smile broadened. The Governak delegate was not his cousin; they had barely met. And Governakians were the most tolerant and unvengeful of beings. They would never have had the least idea of making trouble for Terra just because the IC had deported a spy who had wangled a second-class passage in the starship that brought the delegation here. Essentially, spies were utterly unimportant compared with interplanetary diplomats.

But then, he told himself complacently, he was a very *good* spy.

The local booster will always be with us . . .

LET IT RING*

John Ossian

3.2 Gray lay the land, oh, says the old poet. It hardly seems so now. Even then it was an illusion, but now our illusions are so much better prepared. Our isolation for example.

If we were rich only in illusion it would not matter, this time. How sad that we are actually rich! It is so much more difficult to die.

Is it becoming more difficult to keep this up, or is it just the concern with the events to come? More time would help. But there is none.

The one about the 3-legged dwarf, for L.

In: 746

Out: 428 Only modest.

Drank too much again. Must be more abstemious.

*Quotations throughout are from *The Underpeople* and *The Planet Buyer*, by Cordwainer Smith. Reprinted by permission of Scott Meredith Literary Agency, Inc.

Plans: To convince the Council to act correctly will need more than I alone can achieve, but at the same time the required action is so careful a balance that inducing others to work will increase the chance of error, and the slightest error is not permissible. Only Kenners really knows what I want, and even he suspects my intent. So that is the first barrier to be removed; but it must be done without artifice, or the attempt will have been wasted.

Two—no amount of speaking can convince *them*. Only here on Strine are words effective, and even then (I should know) things go slowly, and that is precisely the point, old friend. I am sure that we have much to offer, and much to gain: these must be maximised, and I can't afford to be too scrupulous.

This seems a damned silly business, almost all of the time, but since there have occasionally been advantages in the past I suppose the habit is worth continuing.

Strine to *gain*: firmer contact, faster access, development potential.

Federation to *gain*: cultural enrichment (slight), market of sorts (again slight). No, it is all on our side, *provided that we do not become a bound colony*. Few have won that game: we must be exceptional. And the margin for error so *small*!

If Kenners, then possibly Mathers also. They are close, but I must move stealthily—that's too strong a word to be used in first person like this, but that's how it must seem, but to no one.



and then



A celebration? Yes, but *not* a wake!

ACTION!

ACTION! I said. Get that thing mov—ah, that's real nice . . . !

Commissioner Turners strolled gaily across the pebbled path that was his in trust. No need to loiter, this fine day. Work, yes, work, would solve all the problems

CUT!

Oh balls, how many times, how *many* times—this old futz is *old*—OH-EL-DEE. He moves *slowly*. Slowly!

3.3 Time is burning and the world on fire, said the poet. It almost seems as though he knew. Certainly a decision is close, and now even five days almost singes the heels. If tomorrow is as today was . . . Ah, but each day I *must* learn something. I think Kenners appreciates my position, but he is so hesitant. Certainly he has a great deal to lose, but I have more, and for Strine it is everything—and so no sleep tonight.

Simple points: almost everyone wants in, but few seem to be able to remember the past. Odd, with so much information available, that it should be regarded as sacrilegious to examine that which is common to us all, and to be concerned with the trivial present. We want in, but on our terms. Too many don't care about those terms. Take ——— for example—no concern for the past at all. Consequence—no future, except a secure slavery. Every physical thing sold for one heart's desires. That is

too easy a path, and that is its popularity. No point in proposing this: only the advantages of alternatives.

K sees all this *I am sure*. He distrusts me, for I, an isolate man, am suddenly become gregarious. But this models our world's situation. Yes, I must put it to him in this way. He appreciates that sort of approach—men as islands, seas of troubles and so on.

Out: 47 Not today.

The enthusiasm of all was somewhat lessened today, I would guess, and this would be favorable, or will be in five days' time. If the mood were only to continue pessimistic for a few days more—say until 5, perhaps 6. Thus by 8 my approach will not only be welcomed by those who know me, but by those who are now (and will then be) vacillating. What now is dark would then be light. But how to keep things going down? And then to recover?

To be associated with the Welkin is essential to our future, this I know: but it seems that we can move only partly on our own terms. And suppose that *their* strength should become ours? Now *there* is an angle to be exploited! To use and be used may be even more difficult, but the reward is high. But that is for the future: the present is close enough—too close.

Must be particularly skilled at the game tomorrow—to lose face now would be disastrous.

X, but hardly worthwhile.

An old man huddled, scratching. CU back. The man stretches one arm, rubs his hands together, and resumes writing.

If it is possible to draw M into my conversation with K—that would be the best approach—but not until K is al-

ready hooked; though perhaps when he is struggling with the focus of the argument? Hard to say. Either if he is raising silly objections or is almost convinced, either will do. Late in the afternoon, at that.

Sell! That will do it! A simple manipulation, which will have to be carefully controlled, but it *can* be controlled. Only low wagers—that will help too.

Incomplete—I could never understand the importance anyway—

3.4 Luck is hot and people funny. If only it could be joked about! K's attitude is inexplicable, unless someone else is getting to him. Or perhaps the Federation is paying him off? Whatever the cause, my attempts were so unsuccessful that all must be changed. Of course Mathers was surprisingly helpful towards the end of that rather painful conversation, and perhaps he can be counted on, but that isn't enough. And he may be playing a double game.

Otherwise a successful day. Sales went well, and money is sliding, though slowly, on all sides. Down three per cent, which is large enough to be rattling, but not serious. Game smooth, though lacking in energy.

3.5 Tell me what your heart has hidden, says the poet. Well, I shall certainly have to do that—not easy, but necessary. Oh, on the last day In 426, Out 357, today In 433, Out 439. Necessary to consider what roll 'em to play.

My Dear Kenners:

I feel that I may have expressed myself either inelegantly or inexactly at our meeting yesterday, and hasten to take this opportunity to describe my position with greater clarity. First let me note that I regard the subject of our conversation and of this letter as of the greatest impor-

tance—I could hardly do otherwise—and feel that the too-readily-grasping attitude of some commissioners, responsive as it is to the great inducements offered to us, yet overlooks some of the dangers inherent in a sudden *surrender*. Perhaps you feel this last word is too strong, and I am inclined to think that it was partly a result of my crude expression of this feeling of mine in our conversation yesterday which led to the conclusion which was, to my mind, unsatisfactory. While the treasures of a galaxy may be offered to us, I think it unwise to forget that we have to pay a price of some kind: it is the fact that this price has not been spelled out in detail which most worries me.

Perhaps if I outline my understanding of our present situation in some detail you will find it easier to come to the conclusion which I assumed in outlining my plan to you. You were affronted then, but perhaps you will come to appreciate my concern and thus what appears now as ruthlessness.

We know from our limited contact with the Federation that Strine is a small but comparatively rich world. The Galactic Federation is, by contrast, very large, and comparatively poor. Comparatively, because there are many poor worlds in the Federation, as well as the few rich ones. When our commissioners think of the Federation, they think of the rich worlds, and forget the poor. I try to think of the poor—in the physical sense. But to return to the point. I know that it is now unfashionable to invoke the name of the Blessed Father Damien, but his warnings from the past seem almost directed to this hour. In his *Speculative History* the Holy One writes of empires:

“Only the insane attempt to seize power: only the strong maintain it. Beware, therefore, the powerful revolutionary.”

(A warning to us all, perhaps, but later he continues:)

“Under the circumstances, any attempt to establish interstellar hegemony (much less a galactic empire) must be regarded in one of two ways: as a manifestation of insanity, in the context previously discussed, or as a drive for power of the paranoid type. This latter, which in the past has led to ephemeral (on the large scale) ultra-authoritarian regimes of unspeakable cruelty.”

Now we do not know *enough* about this “Galactic Federation.” We know that it *seems* benevolent. We know that membership *seems* to be by invitation, and that some worlds are known to have refused. But we cannot experience for ourselves being a part of this Federation. And no world has ever *left* the Federation, a circumstance open to at least two interpretations. I am prepared to accept that the Federation is indeed benevolent, and that on this occasion the Blessed Father Damien’s foresight was at fault. But I do not believe that we can realistically approach this union in the lighthearted way espoused by some of our fellows: we must beware of the dangers, and we must remember that these will not be immediately apparent.

Now our situation is this: though we are committed to enter the Federation we can still, in fact, opt out (though there are very few persons of influence here on Strine who would

even consider such a proposition, more's the pity). Such an action would set back our full admission to the Federation decades—perhaps even longer—and for this reason, if no other, such an action could only be taken after careful and dispassionate, I repeat *dispassionate*, study of the function of the Federation as it now is. That is the first problem: to make our fellows (you see, I am already accounting you as one of my associates) realize that this is a practical, not a theoretical, course of action. When this has been established, and only then, we can move on to the more serious problem. Almost all of us are now determined, I think, to try for the right to host a Welkin, that festival of worlds at which, according to our lights, we can measure the extents of co-operation and coercion between the various worlds of the Federation. We cannot possibly offer for any of the next four or five Welkins, but we will of course send delegations to those to spy out the land. Those who are opposed to us see this as an opportunity for sporting and fun: I, and you I trust, see it as, regrettably, a matter of some seriousness, though I must confess that my age has somewhat lessened my enthusiasm for the more popular sports.

And there is that other, most serious of problems. In my mind it is essential that we should, before finally joining the Federation, examine the broad *and* the specific reactions of those of the Federation to our own beautiful world. I will emphasize it: those of the Federation. It is presently supposed that, as a result of the clamor of so many new worlds to join the Federation, and the desire of each and every one to host a Welkin (in the main, I would suppose, for reasons much the same as ours), Welkins

should be held on non-Federation worlds far more than has been the case in the past. Many have looked on this suggestion with favor, including many of our own commissioners. I, as you know, oppose the idea: not so much because it is my nature (and you know that such is *not* my nature), but because it will deprive us of that vital test we need. For I believe, and I think you agree with me, that as the Welkin moves further from the Federation, so will the interest of the Federation decline. Perhaps slowly at first, but inevitably. Since we are committed, except under the circumstances I have suggested above, which are dismissed as 'impossible' by so many of our colleagues, to a course of action leading inevitably to our absorption into the Federation we must measure the Federation: if we hope to do so by hosting a Welkin we need the Federation to be present, dominant. And it is my immovable belief that if more non-Federation planets host Welkins then within a few years, by the time that we on Strine are ready for our turn, so few Federation representatives will be present that our measures will be illusory: the Welkin will be dominated by non-Federation worlds wanting tips for the future. It is for these, and perhaps other, reasons that I propose to speak on Nine, and I hope that I will have your support and that of others.

Believe me to be your sincere friend,
Ring the bells and climb the steeple
Turners
going
to screw the people.

I think that puts across the main points. At least K will be prepared for the events of three days hence.

Sales still dropping, but the prices are bottoming. In 339, Out 448. Aiel for me.

3.6 The wheels of fate are spinning around. How appropriate are the words of the old poet! For my letter cannot help but be regarded as a foolish thing. Though the gain may be great, the striving was not proportionate. What was gained with Mathers, today, so joyfully, may have been lost irretrievably by that over-anxious letter. Were I younger I should not have made such a mistake: indeed, I think I must have had the opportunity to make mistakes of such a magnitude in the past, and my writing these quiet words now is a tribute to my youthful caution. Soon I may have no such fond memories of the past. There are times when a son—but no, abhorrent thought!

Nevertheless, prices have flattened completely, with minor oscillations. Sales still drop, but this is favorable, today. Tomorrow there must be a slight upward turn. I feel that it will not take a great investment to introduce the necessary optimism. Shall I guess a figure? No, with my difficulties such a game is, well, a game. If *only* I had not sent K so detailed a letter! Nowhere do I make myself so explicit that it is dangerous, but to have been so hasty, with so much at stake, and with so little to gain. 325-146.

FADE TO: puzzled face.
Cut to CU diarist's back.

3.7 Tell me, love, what you most desire! Ah, Anthony, this would have been a day for you! No more glorious day can I remember, even far, far in the days when I, a springing, jounced my way over those goddamn pebbles. Those pebbles! Ah, the rough with the smooth, and now?

3.75 Ever? One, sales recovered slightly. Two, prices excellent. Three, the replies of Kenners, both oral and

written, are almost too encouraging. Though a great weight has been lifted (and indeed, while Kenners is now occupying my gloomy estate of yesterday) there is much to be done. Mathers must be won over more completely, *necessarily* alone. Not easy, for he or I. A risk.

I am beginning (at my age) to see why the custom is as it is. By consulting these notes, more closely than I have ever done before, I can not only come to understand my own frailty and changeability, but there are almost moments when the changes are predictable. Learning from the past mistake is one thing: having a half-perception of the future, though dangerous, can be well-used to great advantage.

Nil. (Of course.)

Now, it seems, the numbers are safe. But we are not yet safe. A little greater effort—that is all.

3.8

Sirs and Masters:

I am known to you all as a simple and humble man. In bringing forward these few simple and humble thoughts I am not only aware that to most of you what I have to say will be a little too obvious, and the minds of those others will only be examining these artless and superficial notions for profundities they do not contain.

I come before the Council simply and humbly, as is my wont, but I believe that in some way I can represent to you views which are not merely my straightforward observations, but which also are common amongst the citizens of this our world. It is thus humbly I come forward, yet proudly that I hope to speak for my people.

Sirs and Masters:

As all organisms grow or die so, it seems, do worlds. It is for this reason (and for others with

which I shall not trouble you) that the High Council in its wisdom has decided to establish a beach-head for growth: to associate the planet Strine with the Galactic Federation, that organization of worlds whose brief contacts with us have already brought to us so many wonders and benefits. Not only is the Federation large and rich: it is wise. The Federation realises that young worlds (and our own is young, in some ways) having a First Contact face severe problems. Thus the Federation says to the newly-discovered worlds: join us if you will. There is no hurry. Do so at your own pace. Even after you have committed yourself to joining us, you may withdraw at any stage up to the final signing without any feeling from us. And we will provide technological advances of many kinds for your own development, whether you decide to join us or not.

Sirs and Masters:

The Federation is like, if I may return us all to the past we have nearly forgotten, a fairy godmother: something we might long for, and then be surprised to discover as actually existing. We have decided, as obviously we should, that to join the Federation will make way for great development of Strine. Thus far, of course, we are only in preliminary stages: investigating, as it were. For the Federation, in its wisdom, advises and even encourages new planets to travel through the Federation observing the machine in motion, and, if I may say this without offense, the oiling of its cogs. As our saying has it, crack the nakful shell and remain a vegetarian.

All this the Federation does, for all new worlds. There are some few of us, I understand,

who approach this matter lightheartedly, as well we all might, for it is a joyous thing to discover that one's childhood dreams are true. But there are others, like myself, who feel that the great honor we have been offered should be treated with great seriousness, as being a matter of the greatest importance and therefore deserving of the most careful scrutiny. We are all men who appreciate the good things of life, but there is not one of us who has not come by them by sweat. There is not one of us who comes to this place who is not scrupulously careful in all the details of personal business. There is not one of us who would give our house to a stranger. And there is not one of us here who would trust he who gives away all that he has for a promise.

Sirs and Masters:

I am speaking plainly, for I am a simple man. The Federation will not honor us for treating their offer lightly. Like greedy schoolchildren to gobble all that is offered with some thought. Sirs, we *honor* the Federation by closely examining it before our own final commitment.

Thus I am greatly pleased that we have chosen to not only send out ambassadors to far worlds to discern their nature, but also to invite men from all worlds of the Federation to visit ours, so that we may see their reactions to our strangeness.

But sirs, I ask of you this: are we concerned with the reactions of members of the Federation, or with the reactions of all off-worldlings? For me there can be but one answer. Though we must observe all, our interest, in this matter, must be confined to those who will most influence our future: so far as we know, to mem-

bers of the Federation: citizens of planets such as we shall become.

And how is all this to come about? Each four hundred standard days a great symposium is held, and has been held for hundreds of years (our time), at which gather the people of the entire galaxy, from both Federation and non-Federation planets. Far in the past, these Welkins were held only on Federation planets, and thus were a showpiece for the Federation. Now this is not so, for since the time of the Toronto Welkin, many of these gatherings have been held on non-Federation worlds. I expect the motivation for those worlds has been much the same as our own: to examine the stranger on familiar ground. Until our own time relatively few Welkins have been held on non-Federation worlds. But now things may be changed.

Sirs and Masters:

The enthusiasm of non-Federation worlds for an increased opportunity of having the honor of staging a Welkin can be well understood. We feel it ourselves. But who of us can predict the consequence of change? And who of us has such great faith in that power of prediction? Is not our whole way of life based upon the assumption of certainty?

Sirs and Masters:

I have heard the views of those who say—let us share in this greater wealth. I have been encouraged by my own observations of life in the Federation. I am greatly encouraged and wholly optimistic.

But sirs, to treat the Federation and its offer lightheartedly is to treat it with contempt. We should not take up a part of this grand offer: we

should accept the whole, and steadfastly pursue our thorough investigation of the Federation's workings.

And this has been threatened. Not deliberately, but almost unthinkingly. To be sure, there are many worlds in the galaxy. To be sure, many of them seek membership of the Federation. But the best resolution of this happy and unhappy situation is not to hawk the Welkin to every jumped-up planetoid. The best resolution is not to despatch the Welkin to the furthest arms of the galaxy. For to do this is to destroy the Welkin as we know it, *and as we wish to use it ourselves*. For soon after these proposed changes we should find decreasing numbers of Federation members visiting the sites of this once-great event. The expansion, and the time of preparation involved, will force Federation members to lose interest in what was once their glory.

I do not ask that you accept everything I suggest, true though it is. All I have asked and am now asking is this: that we should treat this matter as one of great moment, as it deserves, and that we should present at the next Welkin the views I have here presented for further discussion.

I am your servant, Lords.

That should, at least with some amplification, swing enough of them: how fortunate it is that the importance of presenting an argument weakly is not widely understood! Sometimes age is an advantage. On all other sides the result is success. I am content, now. Prices starting to rally nicely. All will be well, I am sure.

3.9 The challenge holds, I cannot now retract.
The boast I made to that relentless court.

Infinity Three

Now I can only wait: the reaction seemed right, and the coin clinked ringingly. They cannot reject me out of hand. They cannot ignore me, either. But again I am uncertain, and I did not expect to feel that emotion *now*.

3.10 Is there anybody here or is everybody dead?, asked the poet, as I ask now. I am too old to care. Should I not have left them? I will not be here. A childish fantasy cannot do harm to children. But to their children. Tomorrow I shall know, as we all will.

3.11 Yes.

FADE

'Hey honey' she said, 'what about the Nazhfiki?': heels drummed urgently.

'I haven't tried . . .'

Roll 'em roll 'em roll 'em

ROLL 'EM ROLL 'EM ROLL 'EM

Can any man ever know himself, completely?

ONE DAY IN THE WAR

Richard Posner

His indigestion, which had been a flutter for most of the morning, seared into his chest suddenly, and he sucked in air to stop the pain. He ran his hand through his hair, which was graying and thinning. The alien next to him shuffled silvery papers.

Travis kept thinking of them as the aliens, even though he was one of a small contingent of earthmen on this artificial planet, filled with the natives of two thousand other worlds, and who the hell were the aliens here anyway? But he was forty-five and set in his ways, and this clown was seven-three, and reed-thin, and his head was a silver-gray oblong, with holes for ears and a hole for a nose and a slash for a mouth and white milky pools for eyes. And that, to him, was pretty damned alien.

His name was Q, which is how the alien spelled it in Arabic letters. In his own language, it was a three dimensional cube that hung shimmering in a transparent box when he pointed his finger. One of seven on each hand. Travis was beginning to hate him.

"We have a long morning," Q said, whistling and clicking his mouth around the thick English syllables. Q could speak eighty Earth languages, including forty-eight African dialects, all atrociously. His own language was not even possible for Travis.

"I know," Travis said sourly. His stomach was a wreck. Two ulcers and working on a third. And the electronic or whatever-the-hell-they-were treatments weren't doing a thing. The aliens had come to Earth and taught the people all kinds of miracles, but they couldn't cure an ulcer. Probably, Travis thought, because they didn't get ulcers. They didn't have nerves, so how could they?

Q rolled the papers, which were metallic, into a cylinder and flicked a long green tongue along the edge, gluing the cylinder into shape. He tucked the cylinder into his floor-length tunic, which sometimes looked silver, and sometimes green. "Shall we start?"

"Yeah," Travis said, leaning back in his chair. "Or we'll never get through."

Q made a high pitched whistling sound, without opening his mouth, and Travis winced. Goddamn aliens. And he was one of them now, assistant head of Interrogation, on their side, waving their flag. Because they'd gotten to Earth first and charmed the pants off President Dacey, who was doubtless one of them, he was such a cold bastard. And they'd convinced everyone that the Quyor—at least it sounded like that—were on their way to blow hell out of New York and Moscow and points North. And here he was, ex-infantry, ex-astronaut, ex-suburban squire, in his tan and green uniform with a gray moustache and three ulcers, interrogating alien prisoners for other aliens on a paste-up planet housing forty billion *things*.

And two hundred and fifty earthmen.

Travis didn't like interrogating. He wasn't the type. He'd told them that, but it was the only position open, and when you have a wife who's rutting in your big round bed with every pimply delivery boy who comes to the door, and a delinquent son who likes to play chicken with rocket cars, and a daughter who joined the Lesbian colony on Mars, you take the position they offer. He'd just made it at that, with his service record. He'd been afraid that his drinking record would militate against

him, but he saw now that they hadn't cared. This was a job for a man at the end of his rope. Every job was, here on Planet X, or whatever they called it (since every creature called it something else, he called it Planet X, refusing to break his mouth on *their* pronunciations).

The room, which was a bare cell with vague glowing walls of an eggshell color, seemed to expand and there was suddenly an archway; the Quyor prisoner walked through it. He was alone, since he'd been implanted with a cute little instrument that would kill him with extreme agony if he flicked a pinky at anybody.

The Quyor were far more human than the Warrit—his aliens—with five-fingered hands and four-toed feet and body hair. They even wore hairdoes, combed straight back and shimmering black, and they had hawkish noses, and feral, pointed ears, and slanted eyes and lips around their mouths, and sharp white teeth. Travis, like all the other Earth folk, had been delighted to learn that *homo sapiens* was a most common inhabitant of the known universe; that the conditions producing man were not at all remote, as Earth scientists kept saying without having seen Creature One from anywhere else. But the joy had turned to curds when some of the variations on "man" started to appear in U.N. Plaza. Crouching things lined on the outside with glistening mucous membranes; transparent giants with organs that worked before your eyes; hairless dwarfs, two-headed men, and other grotesques. But they were all part of the Twelve Thousand, the Warrit-led federation of planets at war with the Quyor and other barbaric races.

And the Warrit made the earthlings believe. They appealed to the earth folk; the Warrit were—well, so silvery and genteel. It worked, anyway. Whatever psychology it was, it worked. President Dacey threw his arms up in his famous All-Is-Well-While-We're-Going-To-Hell salute, and embraced the expressionless Warrit, and Earth was at war, with the Quyor. And as soon as the announcement came of the contingent of two hun-

dred and fifty to oversee the military operations out there, Travis packed a duffle bag at two in the morning and took off.

His ulcers burned now as he looked at the Quyor. This one was bronze skinned and beautifully muscled. He was nude except for a yellow thing that came up over his genitals like a diaper and crossed his shoulders in two bands. And a wrist band that glowed slightly. He stared at Travis and stood easily.

Travis rummaged in his desk drawers for the proper forms. It was decent of the Warrit to provide the Earthmen with Earth equipment, but they'd never heard of privacy, because every night—artificially induced, of course—someone cleaned his desk and managed to misplace every document on it.

He found the interrogation forms and rolled one into his typewriter. The metallic paper made a rattling noise in the carriage, and Travis flicked on the switch. The machine hummed softly and glowed, gently lighting the paper.

"Okay," he said. "Q, ask his name, please."

Q pursed his mouth and made several low growling noises. The Quyor definitely grinned, and Travis repressed a smile himself. Obviously, Q was making a hash of the Quyor's language, too.

The Quyor kept looking at Travis. He made low noises, but they sounded musical and made Travis shiver. Q said, sloppily, "Captain Fort, X Division."

Travis knew Q was not translating with complete accuracy, since there was no proper translation for the prisoner's rank. Rank itself was hard to fathom in this war. Commanders of the huge fighting ships were apparently legendary figures, and the Commandos—the special forces who flew fast little ships on suicidal missions—were folk heros, and very mysterious. He'd seen them together, walking the corridors, in their yellow tunics, and they were a tight little clique. But other than that, there didn't seem to be any hierarchy that he could dis-

cern. Every soldier talked to every other soldier on what looked like intimate terms. He imagined there had to be descending ranks below Commander. This whole Earth contingent had been set up in a godawful hurry, with minimum education as to the sociology of the Warrit. There were twenty sociologists here with the contingent, and they were cramming like mad to catch up so they could teach everybody else. Meanwhile, everybody else had to guess. Travis guessed that the protocol lay in the language, and that shades of whistling or something like that determined the amount of deference in what was said.

But it made him uneasy. Q had been assigned to him as adjutant, which meant, Travis assumed, that Q was a young officer. But you couldn't tell age with the Warrit, and they were supposed to live for hundreds of years, so this clown might be three hundred and forty, and in complete contempt of his boss. Travis felt that way most of the time.

He typed in the information and leaned back. "Well, Captain Fort. You were captured in the siege of Lanto." Lanto was the home planet of the Warrit, but only the backward peoples still lived there, the Warrit—or the super-Warrit, if one assumed that everybody on Lanto was a Warrit—having moved to Planet X some time back.

Fort looked introspective for a minute, as if criticizing himself for a bad maneuver. He grunted.

Q said, "He says that's right."

Travis said, "Well, we're going to ask you some things, and I know you've been trained not to answer, but you will answer eventually, at the cost of your mind, so I'd suggest answering now and keeping whole."

He felt the usual throbbing in his head as Q translated. He always felt an odd surge of power when he did this, and he didn't like it. He'd been obliged to send several Quyor to the little room where they extracted information and melted the prisoner's mind to jelly, and he'd

managed to block it out. But the possibility returned with every new man.

And why the hell was he doing this anyway?

He started. It was an odd thing to pop into his head now, and not before. He'd just assumed that the Warrit were breaking Earthmen into every aspect of the operation. But now, suddenly it didn't make sense. Interrogation was a subtle art that needed psychological mastery, and the Warrit obviously knew a lot more about the Quyor than Earthmen did. Why would they want to go through the rigamarole of translating every question when Q or some other Warrit could do the job as well?

He was suddenly frightened, and the realization that he was alone with two utterly alien creatures was abruptly very clear. He felt his stomach burn again and he looked at Q. Q was standing very still, twisting his fourteen long fingers. He was looking at Fort. Fort was looking at Travis.

Travis thought, *You'll ask Captain James about it tonight. This isn't the place to ask questions of the Warrit.*

He turned back to Fort. "You obviously have enough men and ships for a siege on Lanto. Just how many fighting ships do you have back at home?"

Q translated. Fort looked searchingly at Travis, as if seeking some brotherhood that was beyond him. He grunted.

Q said, "He won't tell us."

Travis sighed. "Surprise, surprise. Fort, listen, they'll melt your mind. Your *mind*. You'll be a vegetable. Do you want that?"

Fort seemed to know what he was saying, and when Q translated, the Quyor paled a little. He'd obviously been told about this possibility back home, but was shaken to really face it.

Q said to Travis, "I don't think we should waste much time on him. He was commanding a blue ship. We know that they are the finest of the Quyor fighting force. We

have other prisoners, much more lowly, who can be persuaded to talk, even bribed."

Travis knew it was so, and he knew, pragmatically, that he should just send Fort to the showers and get on with the day's work, which was going to be a bitch. He felt tired already. But he couldn't just dismiss the man.

The man. Funny that he thought of the Quyor that way. So much depended on looks. According to the Warrit, the Quyor would calmly destroy several thousand years of graceful civilization if they won. And the Warrit civilization was breathtaking. Fluted, lacy cities columned and arched, with hanging gardens of silver and black plants; lighted towers with ballrooms around the outer surface, lit from within; three dimensional art that shifted with the eyes, a complex society on hundreds of social levels, clean, crime-free to all appearances, peaceful. The Warrit were odd ducks, but they'd conquered the animal in the human soul.

Fort kept looking at him. Travis looked back, trying to get inside that mind, the mind of a soldier of this universe. There'd been some action on the way out, and Travis remembered the horror of lights, incredible lights bursting constantly, just lights, no sounds, no shaking of their ship, just lights, and the announcement in odd whistles, "We are attacked; stay in your berths." Travis remembered clutching at the leathery mattress of his bed and trying to shut out the lights and the nightmare penetrating to his soul, and he remembered crying, sobbing for it to stop. He'd been decorated three times in Vietnam, for facing the enemy head on, without flinching, but those lights were every childhood terror he ever knew. And these—men—like Fort, did battle with those lights, that literally extinguished a ship if they scored a hit; fought with them every day.

God, they *were* alien. All of them. He had no reason to be here; none of the Earthmen did. Who the hell knew what the Warrit were thinking or doing, or what they

had in store. Maybe they were going to murder them in their beds, or melt their minds for kicks. And here they all were, the gallant Earthmen, impossible numbers of light years from Earth, on an artificial planet playing war games with creatures they didn't understand.

Travis was shaky now. He had to break this mood. He said, too brusquely, "You're right, Q. Take him out of here."

Fort's eyes narrowed, and the Quyor sucked in a breath that made his huge chest expand. Travis was caught and held by the eyes, smoky yellow and deep, and he felt sick, like he'd betrayed a brother. *Jesus, I'm on the wrong side, we're all on the wrong side.*

Something flickered past his face and snapped, like a whip, and the Quyor reeled back, his hand going to his cheek. Travis turned and Q pulled back his arm. The Warrit still looked impassive, but his skin was brighter and he seemed to quiver.

"I had to," Q said, suddenly, and Travis recoiled at the alien struggling with the English sounds. "He wouldn't look at me. The bastard."

Q's voice rose shrilly and Travis got to his feet. "Stop it," he said. "What the hell is the matter with you? He can't touch you."

Q turned and looked at Travis, and Travis felt himself wither under the blank look. He was panicking. He wasn't to allow any incidents. He said, "You can feel what you like, but we just do our work here. Do you understand that?"

Q seemed to abruptly relax, and something that looked like a smile spread on his face. "Yes," he said. "I can't expect you to know the depth of the feeling between the Quyor and the Warrit. Not yet."

"Let's just get this guy out," Travis said.

He turned to Fort, but he saw only a blur. Fort was on Q before Travis could moisten his throat. Q went down heavily under Fort's attack, and the Quyor wrapped his huge hands around Q's slender neck and tightened them;

Q's face turned a dark gray color and the Warrit gaped at Travis, uncomprehending.

Travis stood back, unable to move. He was suddenly one with the Quyor, strangling the smug, pompous bastard now writhing in its silver robes, and he felt his face flush as his arms ached with the act Fort was performing. He could see that Fort was in agony; every muscle on the Quyor's body shivered violently, and it was obvious Fort was hanging on through sheer will. But it would be enough to murder Q.

Travis unsnapped the holster on his hip, and the pistol was in his hand in less than a second. He aimed one shot through Fort's skull and another through the Quyor's neck as he fell back. Blood spurted from the wounds, and Travis felt sick as he saw that the blood was red.

Fort toppled and quivered on the floor, then lay still. The blood puddled on the eggshell surface and glistened wetly. Q struggled to his feet and massaged his neck delicately. Travis shoved the pistol back in the holster. He hoped he'd scared everyone outside to death with the shots—one thing he'd insisted on was the old fashioned method of dealing with trouble. He wasn't going to shoot light rays.

He looked at Q, now lusting for punishment, wanting some sort of resolution. "Okay, put me under arrest or whatever the hell you do."

"No," Q rasped, composing his robes. "Since you did kill him, there's no need."

Travis was suddenly anguished at the loss of Fort. "What are you talking about?"

"You did your duty," Q said.

Travis was bitter. "Yes, I did that, didn't I? But I wanted him to kill you. He's more human than you are."

Q sniffed distastefully at the Quyor's body. "Of course he was. That's why we had you questioning them. Both of you are"—Q made a vague gesture—"very close. We could never get through to them. We just kept melting minds. But you're marvelous. So many have talked to

you. And we can use them again, for other things. I suppose they all hope you'll join them."

"I might," Travis said.

Q dropped metallic lids over his eyes and lifted them. "No. That's romanticism. Your people embraced us, we're like you and you're like us, not them."

"Humanity throughout the universe," Travis mocked. "Which is, pardon me, a lot of crap."

"Yes, it is." Q's voice was hard now. "If you mean by Humanity this kind of romanticism, that leads to forced mingling of people like the Quyor with us. You wouldn't like it either, I know. We tested you Earth people, like we test all new races when we find them, and you're one of us, my friend."

Travis said, softly, "You hate everybody, don't you?"

Q made another high pitched whistle. "Yes, we do hate a lot. Without shame. We hate what's impure—as you do. You hated your wife and children because they weren't pure. And you hated well enough to kill in your hot little jungles when you were a boy. We know a lot about you, Travis. You think you're a romantic, but you hate the impure, the way we do. And you'll help us purify."

The floor glowed brighter, apparently in response to Q's whistle, and the body of Fort sank suddenly and was covered by the floor, which then settled and was clean.

Q cocked his head at Travis. "Shall we go on?"

Travis sat down, his stomach on fire. *I am not like them*, he screamed.

Q whistled. Travis folded his hands on the desk and waited for the next prisoner.

What follows is fiction only because it was not indeed written at a desk on Ganymede . . .

TOUCHSTONE

Dean McLaughlin

I see by the news that they're debating whether to send a manned mission to Barnard's Star. The giant step, it's being called; for men to go outside the solar system for the first time. I don't have much to contribute on the subject—certainly nothing logical or even rational. But I think the argument is pointless.

I know it will be done. If not now, someday. If not that star, another.

We've come to a point, now, where it's possible. We need no more technological breakthroughs. We have the propulsion system: a fusion powered ion jet that can operate continuously for years. That was the last obstacle. Already—unless it's suffered mishap in the time since it transmitted the tracking signals most recently received—the first of our interstellar probes is more than halfway to Alpha Centaurus.

The only other hardware we needed has been on the shelf for years. We needed a life support system that could maintain a stable environment indefinitely, and a radiation shield that could reduce the crew's exposure level to a point that would permit several years of continuous irradiation. With what we have now, we could send a mission to the Magellanic Clouds.

One other thing is necessary, but I think we have that,

too. People being the sort of creatures they are, I have no doubt there are men and women who would consent—with eagerness!—to devote years of their lives to the voyage, fully knowing they risk death, and that even if no accident prevents their return, everyone they have known—even their own children—will have died of age before they come back.

We could begin the work today. That is all that is really being argued: the question of whether the project should be started now.

Perhaps this will help you to understand my feeling. The first landing on the Moon, in 1969, has frequently been likened to Columbus reaching the New World. It has become a cliché. I think of it in far more fundamental terms—that putting men on the Moon was the equivalent of a thing that happened hundreds of millions of years ago, when living creatures came out of the sea for the first time, to walk on dry land. Clumsily, at first, but with increasing facility.

Opponents of such a venture—I'm talking about Barnard's Star again, now—want to know how much it will cost. They don't mean just kroner and ore, nor do they mean it in terms of human effort, nor even the diversion of resources to that purpose rather than some other which they feel to be more important.

They are thinking of it as an investment of all these things, and asking—will this expenditure be repaid? My answer is yes, though perhaps not in a way that accountants can understand. You get what you pay for; if you are willing to pay, it is worth that cost.

Some of you are old enough to remember back to 1969, and may recall how the first landing team came back with samples of the rocks and dust that lay where they left their footprints. And how some of those samples were distributed to research men all over the world.

I was a graduate student, then. As it happened, I was in the office of a mineralogy professor at the university where I was studying—I don't remember his name—

when someone came down the hall and stuck a head into the room.

"Joe," he said—or whatever my professor's name was. "Lovejoy's back from Houston. He's down at the department office, and he's asking where you are." Not that Lovejoy was really the name; I don't remember any of the names. I'm just putting that name where a name belongs.

My professor got up from his desk. "Come along," he told me, and we went back along the corridor. Lovejoy must have had a good idea where my professor was, but we all knew why he'd gone to Houston. And I guess if I'd been bringing back what Lovejoy brought back, I'd have been doing a bit of grandstanding, too.

When we got to the department office, Lovejoy was there in the middle of the room with half the men in the department crowded around. He had something small in his hand. He saw us come in.

"Ah, Joe," he said. "There you are." He shouldered through the crowd. "I'm going home and get some sleep. What a rat race! I just stopped off to leave this. We don't have any time to spare, so you'd better start the work."

He gave my professor a piece of glass tube. It was about the size of a penknife. It was sealed at both ends, and it had something dark inside, sandwiched between two plugs of white styrofoam. My professor took it as if it was the biggest diamond in the world.

I didn't see Lovejoy go away, but I guess he did. All I remember is the way my professor just stood where he was with the tube in his hands. He was one of those precise, meticulous people who always seemed to have nothing but machinery inside. I think he'd gotten into mineralogy, not because it really interested him, but because it was work he could do with the exactitude that satisfied his personality. But the minute he had that tube in his hands, he didn't do a thing. He didn't even move.

After a while, one of the other professors came over. "Are you all right, Joe?"

My professor just shook his head and sort of turned away. I got a close look at him then. He was trying to keep his expression plain, but he wasn't doing too good a job of it and the tears were leaking out from behind his glasses. I don't think he could have seen anything smaller than a battleship just then—certainly not that piece of glass in his hands.

Well, I took hold of his arm and steered him back to his own office. He didn't say a word the whole time, and I didn't try to make him. When we got there he sat down at his desk and put the glass tube on the blotter in front of him. After a while, I asked him if he was all right, and all he said was, "Find Smith and Jones. Ask them to come here."

Smith and Jones—or whatever their names may have been—were the junior members of the research team that was going to work on that particular piece of the Moon. He was dabbing at his face with a handkerchief when I left the room. I guess I didn't see him again for a couple of months. He was busy. And when I did see him, we didn't talk about what happened.

I suppose those of you who fail to share my feeling about the Barnard's Star project won't find the incident persuasive, nor even comprehensible. I can say only that—to me—it had significance. And it was the only moment I ever saw that man as genuinely human.

Always and ever, each time a new venture is suggested, the same scornful question is asked: why?

They mean, what's to be gained? The answers are many, but they are not answers that satisfy the people who ask because the askers are demanding a justification of something which those who are asked believe not to need any justification beyond the act itself. To such persons—and I am one of them—it would be equally sensible to ask: Why should a man go to Sumatra? or the Galapagos or to Tristan de Cunha? They are remote lands.

Their existence touches hardly anyone beyond their shores. Yet always there have been men irresistibly drawn to such places, for no more rational motive than the satisfaction of knowing what is there. I should like to believe there shall always be at least a few such man.

And ever since the days of Troy and Nineveh, Babylon and Dilmun, it has been a man of small spirit indeed who has felt no touch of marvel at the tales brought home by travelers.

When I look up from my desk here in Ganymede Station, I can see through the window the more-than-moon-sized, bold-banded bulge of Jupiter. It does not touch the lives of many men, for all that it looms large in mine.

When Ganymede Station was established, a few years ago, we came with many questions, many things we wanted to know—answers we sought, not for any practical reason, but for the pure sake of knowing.

We knew that Jupiter radiates into space several times more energy than it receives from the sun. We came in the hope of learning where the energy came from, what process created it, and how it was transmitted from that source to the planet's upper atmosphere.

We came here also knowing that Jupiter's atmosphere contains several enduring but probably non-solid features, of which the famous red spot is only the largest and most remarkable. We do not know what they are, nor what prevents them from being dispersed, nor even why they drift and change position. Not very important questions, perhaps. Not in mundane terms, anyway. But we feel a need to know.

(Why? Do we *need* a reason?)

And we had reason to believe, before we came, that Jupiter's core was gravity-squeezed so tightly that the properties of its matter would be unlike that of anything ever studied in Earth-based laboratories. We wanted to confirm that guess, and wanted, too, to discover the pe-

culiar properties matter in such a state would have—halfway between the core of a world and the heart of a star.

Knowing these things will not be useful to Earthbound people, nor shall it put cash in mens' pockets, nor bread in their mouths. But for some men—myself being one—the search for such knowledge is a thousand times more beguiling than gold. In the years since the first touch-down on Ganymede, we have discovered much. There have been many surprises. I'm sure you've heard of a few, such as the stereophotos of Jupiter's outer moons—the retrograde four—which show that three of them would fit together as perfectly as bits of a picture puzzle. (What force broke them apart? And when? Is the fourth moon also a fragment of that larger mass?)

And there are the pseudobergs—those hulks of partially solid material that rise to the top of Jupiter's cloud layer like sea beasts breaking surface. They float there a while—a few hours or days—then, unexpectedly, they roll like sleepers in their drowse and sink out of sight. Five have been seen, now; one was almost five hundred kilometers across. Their surfaces are granular and easily eroded. Their coloring is like jumbles of crushed glass. We do not know what they are made of, nor why they rise, then disappear.

We have more questions now than when we came. And the questions we brought with us remain essentially untouched. I do not know if we shall ever have final answers. I am not even sure I would want final answers.

For that is the most important of all the things we have learned—the one thing we have learned above all others: that as we learn, we learn also that there is forever more yet to be learned. And the answers we pry from the unknown do not fully satisfy, for they—in their turn—prompt new questions in our deepest thoughts.

Man is an animal that asks questions. It is the search for answers to those questions, not the satisfaction of knowing, that tempts us to new ventures. There is some-

thing in the human spirit that needs large, multifarious questions that do not yield easily—that demand lifetimes of effort to solve.

Barnard's Star is one of the faintest stars known. It lies six light years from us. Only the twin stars of Alpha Centaurus and their companion, Proxima, are nearer. Barnard's Star displays the largest proper motion of any known star—a measure of the speed with which it moves across the firmament of more distant stars. And we know that Barnard's Star has at least one companion too small to be seen; too small, even, to be a star itself. It is a planet—a world. Very probably, there are several. We wonder how old those worlds might be, and what implications that knowledge might have toward our knowing the age of our own solar system. And the age of the universe.

(Or is the universe eternally young? Or ageless? Do such questions even have meaning? Are they the right questions to ask?)

We peer out toward Barnard's Star like people on the shore of a sea. We ask questions. When men go there, they will find more questions to ask. And beyond those questions, more. That is always the way.

When I accepted the invitation to come here, to Ganymede Station, some earthbound people could not understand. One of them asked, in scorn, "What do you think you'll find, up there?"

I gave the only answer I could. I told him that I did not know—that we never know what we'll find, ever. That is why we go.

What follows is fable. There would be no point to it if it were truth . . . or is it the other way around?

THE BARD'S TALE

Terry Dixon

. . . As it was told in olden time, by Voth, son of Darmuu, fabled bard of Zorayne, only planet of the double star, Thoomiun I and II:

I am old now, almost three years old, and have not long to live. Many stories I have told, and many songs sung, around the fires, and in the halls of the great, and in the cottages of the humble. One day soon I shall tell my last story. Perhaps *this* will prove to be my last—who knows? For I am tired, and my memory is but a flickering thing, and my old bones ache with the ills of their antiquity. Near three full times since I was born, our world has wheeled in its colossal orbit around our twin blue suns, and in that lengthy span I have travelled from pole to pole, sometimes on foot, sometimes on zargaback, telling my tales to all who would hear, and when there were none to hear (for often I traversed silent deserts or floated on rafts down rivers of laughing fish), I would tell my tales to the clear coral sky, to the phalymor trees, to the chattering, furry thrixx-birds, to the cool and moonless night.

There is one story I have seldom told, because it is hardly a story at all, there are no battles in it, no roaring beasts, no lovely girls in gauzy gowns. And I do not even know what it means. It is not the thing to win me alms or

bread, not a tale to charm the thanks from prince or peasant. I used to tell it sometimes when I was young, but it only made people weep, so I do not tell it any more.

For reasons I do not understand, I want to tell it now.

Who first told me the story I do not know, told it or sung it, for it may have been singsonged to some old tune, but story or song, I was a very small child at the time, and the fragrant hot spice of baking was in my nose and the taste of milk in my mouth, and I was warm and snug and a little sleepy, and someone told or sung or chanted this story, a story about children as young as I was then.

I never knew where on Zorayne it was supposed to have happened (in barbarous Kahs? in civilized Troin?), or when (The First Dynasty? The Volthikkian Age? The Reign of the Worm God?), or what the names of the children were, but it seems that they were playing a game of kings—the weather, I have the feeling, was warm, the suns bright, and they were tanned, barefoot little urchins, none taller than a sooma bug.

Small as they were, though, when they drew themselves up to full height and spoke loftily and haughtily in their piping voices, they could be very regal indeed. More regal than most kings, with far more dignity and pomp and proud disdain (for everyone knows that real kings are often sad, and afraid, and self-doubting, and so weighted down with worries and woes that they find it hard to stand up straight all the time).

"Kneel down!" one miniature monarch demanded.

"Off with his head!" decreed another.

"Pay your taxes!" said yet another, having no notion what taxes were, but the word was spoken often at the supper table.

"Share your bread with the poor!" said the smallest boy.

"What kind of royal command is *that*?" one of his playmates said.

"That's not the kind of thing kings say!" agreed another.

"It isn't?" said the smallest one.

"No!" replied a sturdy boy. "Kings say things like: 'Throw him in the deepest darkest dungeon!'"

"And: 'Raze that castle to the ground!'"

"And: 'Flog that peasant!'"

"And: 'Burn that town!'"

"And: 'Bring me more wine!'"

"'More meat!'"

"'More gold!'"

"'More women!'"

"'Be quick about it or I'll break you with stones!'"

"Not," imperiously sneered the sturdy lad, "'Share your bread with the poor!' That's not what kings say!"

"Why not?" said the smallest. "That'd what *I'd* say, if I were a king."

"You're a baby!"

"You don't know anything about kings!"

"You don't know anything about anything!"

"You can't play with us!"

"Go home to your mama, baby!"

The smallest child walked a few steps away from them and silently watched their play. He felt no resentment. He was the youngest and smallest, and the youngest and smallest are always left out of things, that's the way of the world, isn't it?

As the game of kings continued, the children felt the need of some solid things to lend substance to their play. So, sticks did service as scepters, and broken boxes became thrones, and an old torn sack was passed from one to another, to serve as a royal robe.

"But we don't have the most important thing of all!" one of them pointed out.

"That's right—we don't have a crown!"

The search for a crown began. One of them found an old pot: discarded, dented, rusty, with holes in it: in short, a perfect crown—but it was too big, it swallowed

up their small heads, covered their eyes so they couldn't see. They threw it away.

Then, from the sidelines, the smallest boy said, "I know what you can use."

"Haven't you gone home yet, baby?"

But after a moment, they grudgingly asked, "All right—what?"

"Flowers," he said. "Those red flowers on that bush over there. You can weave *them* into crowns."

Their first impulse was to scoff, but in the next moment, realizing the value of the suggestion, they descended upon the bush, stripped it of its bright blossoms, and soon were strutting about in brilliant red coronets. All but the smallest boy. By the time he got to the bush, it was bare.

The other boys ran off, leaving him alone. His mother, who watched all this from the nearby cottage which was their home, now called him in to supper. She stroked his hair and softly said, "Did the big boys take all the pretty flowers, dear?"

As I think the story went, he smiled and proudly showed her a stark and spiky wreath. "I don't mind, Mama, there are some thorns left for me," said her son.

And the mother, she knew not why, began to weep.

But I do not tell that story anymore, for I do not know what it means, or if it is true or false, and such stories a bard is foolish to tell.

. . . *Thus ends a tale told by Voth, son of Darmuu.*

*Three ships set out from the dying planet . . . carrying
Death to the universe . . .*

THE MONADIC UNIVERSE

George Zebrowski and Gerald Hull

I

"Looking back through the computer enhanced electronic telescope," the voice from the screen said, "the solar system is wrapped in a shimmering field—as you can see—which nothing in normal space can penetrate. It can best be described as a field-disruption anomaly of some kind—a terrifying quirk in the electromagnetic-gravitational continuum of near-sun space. Inside the anomaly physical laws are gradually becoming more indeterminate, and no reversal or halt to this tendency is expected.

"It is assumed that your three ships exited the anomaly safely through hyper-space. Contact with myself and those still alive on earth is now impossible. There is no way to determine exactly how much time earth has before the end. Now you must act as if your three ships are all of humanity."

The picture on the screen changed and a woman's voice continued the narration. The view showed a dense starfield. "It is believed," the female voice said, "that this region of space, twenty thousand light years toward the galactic center, is filled with earthlike planetary systems relatively close together. Though transit time via hyper-

space has never been accurately measured from point to point, to give us a yardstick, it is estimated that it will take at least eight decades to reach the target area utilizing current technology; this is still an improvement over transit via normal space. The perfection of drive systems is a matter for your future.

"We did not choose a closer target because suitable targets are more scarce in near-sol space; and, looking toward your future, our planners decided that it would be worth the effort to establish multi-system colonies at once—to insure humankind's survival, cultural differentiation and—"

Rescher cut the sound from his headset and watched the visual without commentary. The star plate of the region of space which had been their destination for the last three decades was thick with stars, to the point where certain areas looked like sheets of light. He looked at massive areas of interstellar dust which blocked out the starlight. He knew he should feel hopeful, but he looked with no emotion at the small screen in the library cubicle. He knew that around the massive egg-shaped hull of the starship the gray nothingness of hyper-space was infinite, unlike the curved structure of normal space-time; and he felt grateful for the visual tie-in with normal space which enabled him to look out into a lighted void hung with the lanterns he knew as stars. He thought of the starship as an old sailing vessel moving within sight of land, fearful of venturing out to sea, out of sight of land, perhaps to fall off the edge of the world . . .

The program was over, the screen was blank. Rescher stretched his arms and yawned. He listened to the silence, to the almost subliminal hum of the ship. Somewhere, he knew, Captain Hoyt had been awakened from long-sleep and was preparing to make his once-a-decade rounds; elsewhere Jay Dunn was awake and probably dreaming up trick questions to ask the computer to see if it was still sane, not merely logical. Sanity in this case

was defined by human interest and a pragmatic concern with human well being. After all, the main cybernetics were in charge of more than two thousand lives, half of them still unborn. The ship had been built for survival, all the half-mile-long egg-shaped bit of it, a microcosm carrying samples of all earth's major life forms, the sum total of human knowledge and culture. All this the earth had thrown in the abyss, humankind's last bid for immortality.

Except for the visual tie-in with normal space, the ship was isolated; even from its two sister ships. Rescher hoped, for the third time in three decades, that the other ships had made it safely out of the solar system; he closed his eyes and tried to reach out with his hope, tried to visualize Rita on one of the other ships, and know that she was alive, that he would see her again under a new sun and sky. He didn't know which ship she was on; each ship was the same and each was nameless. Each had been completed at a different time, and he had made Rita go on the first one. No one had taken the trouble to name the ships later on. It was as if a special kind of modesty, a superstition really, would somehow enable humankind's ships to slip past fate's gaze to safety.

He remembered that last night on earth, now thirty years in the past. Rita had already gone. He remembered the strange electrical storm dancing across a night sky in which stars were streaks instead of points; he knew that it should *seem* as if it was only yesterday. He had awakened only three times since the ship had entered hyperspace, and time past should seem like only three nights to him; yet it seemed to him that he *felt* every year of those three decades, despite the artificially induced deep sleep which had been designed to produce dreamless slumber. He felt the ship's isolation in the formless unreality of the alien plenum; he felt the ship's emptiness of humanity; he thought of the endless corridors opening

into the central hold of the ship where the sleepers rested, waiting to be reborn.

He got up and left the cubicle. In the hallway only the dim footlights were on. He coughed and listened to his echo. He crossed the hall and stepped into the empty elevator. A few moments later it let him off in front of one of the two screen lounges on the top deck. He walked in slowly, still a bit groggy from sleep, and sat down in a reclining chair in the row against the wall. The empty chairs sat with him, staring at the three blank rectangles which were the observation screens. He pushed a button on his right armrest and they lit up.

The universe was there; it could be counted on: three rectangles of darkness littered with stars. The left screen showed the view aft, where the stars trailed off into nothingness between the island galaxies. The right screen showed a rotating view of space, seen from the largest circumference of the egg-shaped vessel. The middle screen was an open immensity into which the starship fled.

The computer adjusted tie-in with normal space made the stars still look like stars; and it corrected the view constantly in relation to normal space as the ship ate up distance toward the galactic center. The view was enhanced, but it was the view of their route as it would appear if the ship had been moving in space-time, slowed down for the perceptions of the human nervous system. He was glad they had been able to make these screens work after all the trouble in design; they broke the ship's isolation in hyper-space. Otherwise the screens would have shown only the empty, unformed grayness: the eyes of a dead man.

He felt restless. The very thought of the ship made him restless. He wanted to break out. He needed a world, a sun and sky, wind and weather; all the things of an earth he would never see again. They would not be the same elsewhere.

After two more sleep periods he would be able to

wake up more people; by the end of the eighth period the entire ship's crew of one hundred technicians would be up and ready to wake the colonists. Two more *nights* of sleep and he would be able to talk to others besides Hoyt and Dunn; but sleeptime was now a full month away and his restlessness worried him.

He remembered how he and Rita had played together at the Farside Lunar Base. Ley Crater had a big gym dome with a heavily padded floor three hundred feet in diameter, and he pictured her slim form jumping after his stocky body in the great space of the dome. He remembered her laughter; he remembered how a much younger Dunn had enjoyed watching them together from the observation deck. He remembered how Hoyt would break the magic spell with his business-like manner when he came to drag them all back to their job. He always came early.

On the middle screen the ship was rushing toward a great mass of stars; toward a billion suns rushing through dust clouds, unaware of the tiny gnat from earth. Actually the ship was a ghost in normal space time and invisible. His thoughts wandered and for a moment he did not notice that the stars on the right screen were gone. A face appeared and smiled at him. A large hand pressed on the outside of the middle screen. The hand became a fist and smashed the screen and reached in from the outside to grab him. He jumped from his chair and moved back toward the door. He felt sweat running down his back underneath the green coverall he was wearing. As he watched, the hand withdrew and the screen became whole again; but the face on the right screen was laughing—the face of a woman with classical features and long brown hair. Then in a wink it too disappeared and the screens showed the view aft and side and the forward rush of the ship.

Rescher found Captain Guillaume Hoyt sitting alone in the large mess hall, drinking a bowl of soup out of the

same large mug which he would later use for coffee. Hoyt was a tall man and he had to lean down to the table as he sat. He held his elbows on the table, keeping the mug close to the chiseled features of his face. Captain Hoyt was the only member of the crew with whom Rescher was not on a first name basis. Hoyt himself addressed people by their first or last names as it pleased him, it seemed. Rescher sat down opposite to him and nervously told what he had seen.

Hoyt downed the rest of his soup and put the empty mug down on the polished metal of the table. "You're half asleep, Frank." Then he rubbed his crew-cut dirty blond hair with the palm of his left hand.

"I'm all right," Rescher said.

"Get something to drink, or eat. I recommend it," Hoyt said.

"Look," Rescher said, "we can run back the screen record up in the control section."

Hoyt looked directly at him, seemingly more alert. "You're not jesting, are you, Rescher?"

"No, I'm not," Rescher said trying to look his most serious.

"I suggest that we go check it," Hoyt said. He stood up, dwarfing Rescher in his chair. Even when Rescher stood up to follow him out of the hall, the Captain was a head taller.

They went down the way between a row of fifty tables, all chairless except for the one they had been sitting at, and stepped out into the hallway where the footlights stretched away into the vanishing point and the center of the ship. The elevator was only fifty feet down the hall. As he walked toward the open door Hoyt said over his shoulder to Rescher, "Dunn is up in the control area now." In the elevator going up he continued: "Something might be wrong with the tie-in to normal space. I suggest we check it, then you."

"I'm all right," Rescher said.

"I suggest we wait. Dunn might be playing a practical

joke. It wouldn't be too hard to program any kind of visual into the screens."

"I *don't* think that's it," Rescher said. He had raised his voice slightly to the Captain. He shut up. In the silence he knew that he had reached Hoyt enough to worry him.

II

The tie-in mechanism with normal space-time was a black box six feet long and four feet tall. It was located a deck below the control area. The room was small. The light flashed on into a harsh electric blue as the three men walked in and the door slid shut behind them. They stood in front of it for a few moments, trying to make some sense from its outward appearance. Finally Dunn walked slowly around the box and stopped on the other side. Rescher remembered the look on both Hoyt's and Dunn's faces as they played back the record of the tie-in visual since the start of their waking watch. Jay Dunn, the youngest of the three, had shaken his head and said, "Ridiculous, something's messing our reception somewhere."

Rescher looked at him now as he walked around the black box. Dunn scratched the back of his head, twisted his light moustache and said, "This thing here channels and organizes our visual contact with normal space into the screen. I wonder what could be wrong with it?"

"You're the physicist," Hoyt said. He seemed to be taking all of this as a personal affront.

"Yeah, I know that," Dunn said looking up at the tall man. "I know how to *fix* things, which is why I get to wake up a lot, but if this involves more theory than I can handle we'll have to get help from the stiffs below, or I spend a lot of time in the library asking questions until I get the right answers."

"It's got to be here, Jay," Rescher said. "The Captain and I both have medical degrees and we're sure that we

all saw what we saw on the screens. It's here that something is wrong."

"Hey," Dunn said smiling, "you two wouldn't be pull —" He stopped in midword, and Rescher could see by the boyish expression on Dunn's face that he didn't believe it.

Captain Hoyt was shaking his head, apparently unmused by Dunn's words. Rescher saw a moment of confusion in Dunn's face, as if the younger man feared possible failure in his assigned tasks.

"The problem is real," Rescher said. But this seemed to make Hoyt even more impatient.

"That cable on the floor; where does it go?" Hoyt said, pointing to it.

"Into the computer in the control section," Dunn said. "I can ask the computer some diagnostic questions to start . . . I guess we should get up there. But I wonder why the computer hasn't started screaming alarm at us by now . . ."

Rescher looked at the black box sitting there, a mysterious mass on the floor, and felt suspicious of it. Everything the ship saw in normal space depended on it. If it failed the screens would fade to show the gray nothingness of other-space, the terrifying vastness beyond familiar reality; an infinite limbo which could swallow them all up in its endless unreality . . .

"Come on you two," Hoyt said and turned to the door. It slid open for him. They went out after him.

The computer was singing a high sing-song when Rescher came into the control room behind Dunn and Hoyt. The control area was an ultra-lighted room a hundred and fifty feet square. When fully staffed it would hold twenty-five crew members. There were four over-size screens, one on each wall. The computer console was located beneath the forward screen opposite the wall where the sliding doors which gave entrance were

situated. Together now, the three men sat down in three of the station posts in front of the console. Captain Hoyt crossed his long legs and put his elbows heavily on the armrests. Dunn sat forward and placed his fingers near the operations controls. Rescher sat back and took a deep breath.

Dunn began punching buttons. The computer cut short its sing-song and gave out a monotone midrange tone.

"Standard check," Dunn said, "I'll have it answer on audio as well as on printout."

The monotone signal changed into a recognizable voice which shaped its words with faultless precision:

ALL UNITS OPERATIONAL
EXPECTED EFFICIENCY
NO MALFUNCTIONS

"Check tie-in with normal space-time," Dunn said slowly.

UNIT WORKING AS DESIGNED
NO MALFUNCTIONS

"Look, Jay," Rescher said suddenly, "ask *how* it works."

"Describe how the unit functions," Dunn said. "Use elementary terms." He gave Rescher a questioning look, a serious looking pout, Rescher thought. Rescher looked past him to Captain Hoyt who sat clutching his elbows now and leaning toward the colored pilot lights on the panel with the usual stoic look on his germanic face. He did not know the man at all, Rescher realized. The Captain's inner workings seemed distant and unimaginable, even though they were probably fairly ordinary. Dunn could be reached regularly, by the simplest words or behavior; but Hoyt was a citadel against the whole universe.

The computer gave its answer:

THE TIE-IN IS NOT A TRUE VISUAL
CONTACT WITH NORMAL SPACE-TIME
IT IS A SIMULATION BUILT UP OUT OF
RELIABLE DATA

ALL THREE SHIPS WERE PRO-
GRAMMED WITH THE SAME SIMULA-
TION A SENSORY EXTRAPOLATION
OF THE VISUAL ROUTE TO THE TAR-
GET AREA

IT WAS NOT POSSIBLE TO SIMULATE
CREDIBLE CONTACT WITH THE OTHER
TWO SHIPS

NO OTHER CONTACT WITH NORMAL
SPACE-TIME IS POSSIBLE

SEE STANDARD FILE ENTRY FOR DE-
TAILS OF THIS PROGRAM AND ITS IN-
CEPTION

Dunn said, "It was telling the exact truth when it said the unit was functioning as *per design*."

"A ploy to keep us happy," Captain Hoyt said softly.

"They left it for us to find out, *if* we asked the right questions," Dunn said.

"But still," Rescher said, "we know what I saw and none of this explains that."

"Anyway, our black box is in *fine* working shape," Dunn said with derision. He gave a hopeless sigh and sat back in his seat.

Captain Hoyt turned in his seat and said, "Anything that damned thing shows us will be approved by the computer. What do you two make of it?"

"Maybe it's to keep us on our toes," Rescher said.

"It is a pretty good view, after all," Dunn said.

"I can see why they thought they had to do it," Hoyt said. "They had to let us know gently, and still keep the goal before us. I think there's more to this."

Rescher knew he was right. He imagined how it would be without the view on the screens—a blank wall of gray for the stiff s to face as they woke up. On earth they had decided not to take even the slightest chance with the future of humanity—what was left of it. *Keep them busy*, the psychs had said, or something like it. If a few of them go poking behind the scenes, let them find out. They may not tell the rest, and again they may. They might laugh at our management, laugh and go on their own way. *Get through! Survive*. What more could there be to this?

Next to him Dunn leaned forward suddenly, punched a tab and asked, "Give more details, search the library."

THE SIMULATION IS A GOOD LIKE-
NESS OF THE WAY TO THE TARGET
AREA

PROBABILITY IS NEAR NINETY PER
CENT THAT THE MODEL AND THE RE-
ALITY RESEMBLE EACH OTHER

A DIFFERENCE WHICH MAKES
LITTLE DIFFERENCE CAN IN THIS CASE
BE IGNORED

"Can the simulator be turned off?" Dunn asked.

YES

IT IS NOT ADVISABLE IN TERMS OF AS-
SUMPTIONS OF DESIGN

THE MAIN UNIT CAN BE DISCON-
NECTED FROM THIS COMPUTER BY DI-
RECT ORDER OR BY DISATTACHING
THE CONNECTING CABLE

"What—what will we see on the screens?" Rescher noticed the nervousness in Dunn's voice. Hoyt shifted in his seat.

NOTHING

AN INDETERMINATE PLENUM

AN UNDEFINED CONTINUUM

"What is our presence in this plenum? Do we have any effect?"

The computer took thirty seconds to answer. Captain Hoyt cracked his knuckles and shifted in his seat again.

WE CREATE SPACE SEMI SPACE WITH
THE SHIP'S PRESENCE

MORE FACTS CAN BE DEDUCED IN
TERMS OF EARTH DERIVED DATA CON-
CERNING SPATIAL CONCEPTS

"I don't know what else I can ask?" Dunn said looking at Rescher and then at Hoyt.

"There would be no point in turning it off," Hoyt said. "It is all we have. A rough progress map, but the only one."

"We can never know just how real the simulation is," Rescher said. "We have to take the computer's word for it, and they could easily have programmed it to say what we *need* to hear."

"We will leave it on," the Captain said as he stood up to his full height. "Let's see if we get any more freak sights on the screens. Rescher, you go up to the library consoles and look up the standard file on this whole thing which the computer mentioned. There may be much more to this. Come back with what you find. Dunn, finish your regular rounds. Gentlemen, I was the first one up this decade and I'm going to get some regular sleep."

"I'll do it now," Rescher said.

Jay Dunn left the control section. Hoyt sat down again at his computer station and looked at Rescher. "Frank," he said smiling, "maybe the whole universe is some kind

of shadow play run by some kind of extra-cosmic black box?" The Captain didn't look right to Rescher. How long has he been awake, a year, five years? Does he take his long-sleep regularly? The lines in his face were deep. Doesn't he want to get where we're all going? Rescher thought.

"That would be mind boggling, Captain." Hoyt didn't answer, but sat back in his chair, seeming very tired; and as Rescher looked at him, he felt his own suspicions, shapeless as they still were, reinforced.

III

"Whoever you are, listening to this now—I must tell you that we had to keep what I'm going to tell you from you so that you would make the attempt, at least, to leave the solar system. You might not have left otherwise." The old man on the screen in the library cubicle spoke very deliberately, with a voice which seemed too forceful for his old frame. "I hope only one person is listening to this, three at most. If you are *one* listening to this, then try to understand, son, that you must tell the others carefully, perhaps not at all. You know now that the visual tie-in with normal space is a kind of sham. But there is something more important."

Suddenly Rescher hated the old man on the screen. He hated him and all the planners who had made it so easy for him and all the sleepers to toss their lives into a gray nothingness, tricked by the promise of *seeing* the promised land on the screens throughout the journey. His palms became sweaty as he gripped the armrests of the chair.

". . . a problem you will have to face concerning the nature of hyper-space," the old man was saying. The skin on his face appeared to be almost transparent. Rescher could tell he was in pain, as the insides of his body slowly fell apart, functioned less and less well within the field of the system-wide anomaly. Rescher felt dread at

the thought of further words from the figure on the screen.

"No ship has ever shifted into hyper-space and come back out without acquiring a deadly kind of energy-potential, which caused the ship to be torn apart upon re-entering the normal continuum. The unfortunate thing about all this is that we suspect that the solar anomaly which now isolates the solar system from the rest of the galaxy was triggered by our experiments with hyper-spatial drives. And, as it turned out afterward, the only way to leave the solar system after the onset of the anomaly was through hyper-space. We had to *make* you leave this way, or humanity would not survive at all. So we set up a program by which you would discover all the problems for yourself—and hopefully the solutions. Exactly how you have been led to listen to me I will never know. These are terrible things I'm saying, I know, but there was no other way that we could believe in. Everything we know is in your computer banks. Use it, add to your data if possible, and begin your computer analysis—begin from as many starting points as suggest themselves to you."

The screen faded, leaving Rescher with his fears. He knew that the old man was probably dead—no, surely dead. He tried to visualize how it must have been on earth during those last days, when reality itself was falling apart, and all the commonplace ways of nature no longer held. Normal bodily metabolic functions could not longer be trusted; the simplest foods would very often kill. World-wide famine. And at night the sky was filled with streaks, smudged stars, and strange lights—the signs of rival forces struggling for dominion over the earth. During the days millions of eyes watched the heavens, but this time it was no mere eclipse, but the sight of a dull red sun, enormously flattened at both poles and dotted with sunspots, another sign of the cancerous wrinkling of space-time which would soon obliterate them all. The vision still managed to stagger

Rescher's imagination: the completely unpredictable unknown had swallowed the entire solar system. Like a frog swallowing a fly.

In the mess hall Captain Hoyt stared into his food as he ate. Dunn sipped a drink. Rescher buttered a piece of synthetic bread slowly. Hoyt and Dunn had been stunned after he had told them the situation. The ship might be the only reality they would ever know.

"I'm scared out of my wits," Jay Dunn said. "I wish you two would talk a little."

"We've got to start some kind of work on this exit from hyper-space problem. Maybe we can solve it before it comes time to come out into normal space?"

"There are two other ships . . . out *there* somewhere," Dunn said, "and they probably know what we know by now. Maybe . . . we'll not be the ship which gets through?"

"Shut up, both of you," Hoyt said without looking up. "I'll have no panic on my ship."

Dunn turned to him and said, "I only meant to—"

Hoyt suddenly threw his knife and fork into his plate and stood up, pushing his chair back noisily.

"Everybody relax," Rescher said. "Please sit down, Captain."

"Look," Dunn said, eager to inject a hopeful note into the scene, "the whole mess revolves around what we know and don't know about hyper-space *and* the ship's drive. For example, how the hell does it know exactly where to go in hyper-space?"

Rescher looked up at Hoyt, who seemed to be looking down at them as if in mockery. Then the tall man sat down, seemingly calmer, and resumed eating.

"I'm going to get some answers, good answers," Dunn said, "because we have to have them." Rescher thought he detected a note of hysteria in the young man's words, but he knew that they would all have to convince themselves, each in his own way, of some kind of hope. He

was certain that Jay was thinking off the top of his brains. What he was saying seemed hopelessly vague, and probably all wrong.

"Go on," Hoyt said, calm now.

"Well—for starters we can set up a hyper-spatial chamber and try to determine the properties inside. You know, the space inside, whatever it is."

"I don't recommend it; it's dangerous aboard ship," Hoyt said. "You know what Frank said about triggering anomalies. I won't order you to do it."

"It's trying something which might work . . . or spend the rest of our lives aboard this tombship," said Rescher.

Hoyt nodded reluctantly. "Get on it, then."

"I know that tinkering is easy," Dunn said. "I'll be careful, Captain. I only hope that we have the know-how aboard this ship to interpret what results I get to make some sense."

Dunn's chamber was a fistful of gray nothingness on the lab table, enclosed in a clear alloy the shape of a foot square box. Inside it the ship's drive field did not apply, thus permitting the other-space from outside the hull to spill into the restricted chamber. Rescher watched the box with Dunn. The light trained on the table in the lab was very bright.

"I don't see what this tells us," Dunn said. "Hoyt will be disappointed."

"I keep expecting it to move around in there," Rescher said, "like smoke, you know. But it only sits. And still I get the feeling that it's something *tangible*."

Hopelessness was a gnawing thing in his belly which he had not been able to shake. Maybe he should go back into long-sleep, and when he woke up again for his fourth watch the problem would be solved. He hated to see even Jay's normal optimism shaken. It would all be fixed when he wakened the next time. New worlds would be there for the taking by the eighth watch, and all he would have to do would be to reach out . . . he re-

membered the long-haired woman he had seen laughing at him from the lounge screen.

"Look!" Dunn said. "Look at that."

In the gray murk of the chamber the woman was smiling at them. Her entire body was visible this time, a beautiful long legged form, luxurious in thigh and breast; her hair reached to her waist, and it drifted around her as she turned and tumbled slowly in the gray field. Rescher was almost certain it was the same girl.

Suddenly she was no longer naked; she was blonde now and wearing a silver bikini.

"I like dark-haired girls," Rescher said.

And again her hair was dark, but flecked with dazzles of red this time.

"We did *that*," Dunn said. "I like blondes. But how in all hell?"

Near the door the screen intercom buzzed.

Rescher walked over, flicked the switch and watched Hoyt's face appear on the screen.

"Both of you get up to the control area. I've just turned off the simulated tie-in with normal space."

In a moment they were both out in the hallway and walking toward the elevator.

"I know he has the authority," Dunn said, "but I wish he'd told us."

Rescher imagined that the Captain might have been brooding about the truth of what it was like outside the ship. Perhaps he had been displeased with himself for accepting the lie of the screens?

When they came into the control area, Captain Hoyt was sitting in the central command station, staring into the gray murk on the forward screen. All the screens showed the same view. Rescher and Dunn walked up to the seated figure and stood at his right hand. He did not look at them, but continued staring into the screen, seemingly shaken and overwhelmed by this great fact of nothingness.

"It is true, it's all true. I convinced the computer to

break the circuit between itself, the black box below and the screens," Hoyt said. "Watch . . . what happens every." Rescher noted that there was little strength in his voice, as if something had been taken out of him, some personal pride in his relation to *reality*.

Before them on the forward screen . . . things . . . began to appear out of the great void. Worlds rushed out of the grayness toward the ship, rich green worlds, and orange-yellow suns to warm them, vivid against the gray spaces. They seem to burst into the nothingness; one moment they were infinitesimal points, the next huge physical bodies.

Rescher saw Hoyt grip the armrests of his command seat. He watched as the strange light from the screen played upon the Captain's tense features.

Now suddenly the space before them was a green vortex of vines and vegetation, a virgin green forest, a great mass floating in other-space.

The ship plowed into it and kept going.

"You two see it?" Hoyt asked. He turned to Rescher and repeated his question. "Frank, you see it, don't you?"

"I see it," Rescher said. Hoyt tried not to look at him directly, Rescher noticed.

"Is it real, can it be *real*?"

"It's as real as whatever real means," Rescher said. He noticed that Hoyt's hands were shaking a bit as he gripped his armrests.

The ship burst out of the green mass of vines and floating plants, and the gray space ahead was now laced with the darkness of normal space, running in with the fluid gray like a mixture of liquid plastics. An eternity away a few stars seemed to twinkle.

"Captain, get a grip on yourself," Dunn said. "You can . . . try and make it go away!" Hoyt ignored Dunn's sudden outburst. At another time it would have received a careful comment on how to address a commanding officer.

Hoyt closed his eyes and his tall frame seemed to

hunch over in the chair. He was breathing heavily and shifting his body around now, like a man possessed.

On all four screens in the control room the new worlds continued to appear out of the grayness, heralds of a new cosmos. They seemed to originate from one point and move outward to fill the emptiness. If they are ours, Rescher thought, we reach out with our hunger, create with our hope . . .

"Captain!" Dunn was shouting.

"I can't," Hoyt said. He sat up and opened his eyes.

Rescher thought, *we cannot 'just create' anything. The power which our minds control moves within a given set of structures, categories according to 'which we think. Our ability should seem no more fantastic than the use of nuclear power, or the harnessing of any new force. A doubt crossed his mind: there might easily be an absolute chaos outside our minds, but we select and order and arrange from it to produce order for us. It might be a different order for an alien being. Sometimes it seems different for other people . . . how much order is out there and how much is ours, he wondered.*

On the screens the worlds were gems swimming in a gray-black ocean, rushing past the ship as it came upon them at unimaginable speed; it was the first indication of motion in the new continuum, the first possibilities of space and order within that other-space. *It is a tangible thing, Rescher thought; not a sterile desert useful only for swift passage from point to point in another universe. Reality abides here also, and the possibility of it welled up inside him. It was the age-long conviction of all intelligent life, the basis of all achievement and struggle—that here there will be something, and not nothing.*

"It seems to be acquiring its own permanence," Dunn said, "it won't change or go away like the girl in the lab."

Hoyt turned in his chair and looked up at Rescher, while Dunn continued to stare at the forward screen, overcome by his own conclusion. "I made those worlds," Hoyt said slowly, "I was sitting here after I turned off

the tie-in. I knew we were all doomed, all those below and those still to be born. Failure was in the cards for me if we could not exit from this gray wasteland—and then it began happening, Frank, and I could not decide whether it was a good or bad thing.” Hoyt covered his face with his hand and Rescher knew that something inside the man had broken. He looked away from him to the forward screen, a petty kindness to the tall man huddled in the command chair.

In Rescher’s mind some of the pieces began to fall into place. The solar system anomaly, the recent events on and outside the ship and Hoyt’s words—these seemed to link up in a patchwork, which when supported by further events, would fuse into a finished explanation. He looked at Dunn, and he was sure that the younger man was pacing him with his own reasonings as he watched the forward screen. Later, the main computer would help them consolidate all their findings. One element seemed to be lacking from his rough scheme: the *power*, the force which could shape the hyper-spatial stuff into anything, where did it come from? Was it everywhere around them? He knew that his mind could *use* it, but where was the source?

He told Dunn what he thought. Hoyt seemed to be recovering his composure.

“Sure,” Dunn said, “agreed. But *how* in hell?” A moment of silence. “The computer will vomit when we try to feed it all this kind of stuff. We’ll have to be careful.”

IV

“The computer now knows everything we knew about hyper-space on earth,” Dunn said, “and what we’ve learned here and in the ship’s lab. We might get a first approximation answer. I’ve tried to program the computer for extreme flexibility by removing certain kinds of conceptual bias. I’ve tried to weight its operations to-

ward the use of the group of abilities we call imagination. I'm going to try it now."

Slowly he punched the keys. The three men sat in their command stations in front of the console and waited. Only the forward screen was on, showing the forward rush of the starship into what seemed more densely star-filled space. Rescher was worried about the Captain, who seemed content to let Dunn and himself handle things. He seemed withdrawn, fearful of any reality which seemed impermanent, Rescher thought. All his life the Captain had counted on the fact of a reality beyond himself unchanging and dependable.

The sing-song of the computer at work echoed in the hard acoustics of the control room. In five minutes the waiting was over, and the computer began spewing out its results, in a compact printed type, indicating that there would be a good amount of material. They each started to read their copy, which came out on rolled paper into their laps.

Hypothesis: the term hyper-space refers to a highly plastic substance or potential which exists in a free state outside the various possible universes. Historical scientific thought postulated it as an unformed potential, the substratum of reality.

Hypothesis: this substance or potential seems to be affected by the thinking of intelligent entities. A few of the discontinuous bodies which have appeared on the ship's screens are such mind-dependent creations; but until now they have been unconscious, lacking in continuity.

It is certain that the solar anomaly was caused by the unleashing of sub-space potentials into normally formed space-time; the immediate cause was the experimentation directed toward

the development of a hyper-spatial drive. Space around the sun was affected by the spill-over caused by such experimentation. Various rival human theorizings about the nature of the universe thus vied to become concrete and destroyed the permanence of previously familiar reality: the competition of an indefinite range of human beliefs, from superstition to the problematical areas of modern physics, resulted in the chaotic discontinuity which we refer to as the solar anomaly.

The previous continuum, if it still exists, cannot be entered again without complete destruction of the object attempting it. As the laws within the solar system grow even more inconsistent, the entire grouping of bodies will contract to an infinitesimal point and disappear.

Observation: in the unformed potential around this ship a new cosmos is taking shape. Steps must be taken to direct it consciously before it takes on permanence. Complete consistency is impossible, and undesirable, since it would result in a static creation lacking in variety and the capacity for change and development. The plasticity of the basic materials of reality is the ultimate scientific description. An explanation of this first fact seems to rest on a principle outside the system, not open to proof or examination, but clearly true.

Fact: once a matrix is forged it becomes independent of its efficient creators—minds—and takes on an existence of its own. The beginning must be sufficient to insure that laws which later become apparent will not seem binding and arbitrary. However, openness is bought

with the inevitability of the final and necessary inconsistency, which previously was known as entropic decline.

Fact: each of the three ships which left the solar system is now the center of its own continuum; each new universe is expanding rapidly, and shortly they may impinge on one another. The effect of the radical adjustment which will occur then cannot be predicted. . . .

Rescher let the tissue thin paper unroll to the floor. The earth, the sun, they became real in a vast desert of unreality—and now the desert had taken it all back. And it would do so again and again. An eternal creation would be impossible, too binding and static. Complete knowledge, exhaustive explanation at the basic level, was impossible. Too little knowledge could be frustrating; too much a bore. Powerlessness would be pathetic, but omnipotence would exclude accomplishment. What is left? Something like this—a life which leaves existence its mystery, pain its warning sting, pleasure its delights, mind the fulfillment of its curiosity. Only a certain kind of being can have these things. A god can't, nor can an animal. When we press the limits we lose our individual kind of being; the precarious balance of mortality and finitude is precious, the source of that share of glory which is ours.

Rescher watched Dunn finish reading the printout. The young man got up from his station seat. Rescher watched him bite his lower lip, and drop the roll of paper hanging out of the computer.

"Jay," Rescher said, "you know, there must have been gods, at some other beginning a long time ago."

"I would like to know," Hoyt said coldly, "how our puny minds can direct all these forces?"

Immediately Dunn seemed to resent the Captain's critical tone of voice. "We've been directing forces in one

way or another throughout our whole history, Captain. Think of all this potential as sitting at the top of a large hill precariously. Our minds give a push and the show starts. Only a small push is needed. We've been doing that since the wheel, in some sense, and the hyper-drive research on earth is another example—and another what we three are doing now."

"If the fields surrounding the other two ships combine with ours, then we will be able to communicate with them?" Hoyt asked.

"Maybe," Dunn said. "They might be trapped in their own cosmos."

"Trapped . . ." Hoyt stared at the floor plates at his feet.

"I guess," Rescher said trying to break the Captain's mood, "that Captain Hoyt will contribute to the pessimistic aspects of our next world." He grinned weakly to Dunn, who shrugged at him.

But Hoyt looked up at them suddenly and shouted, "Damn both of you! The devil knows what will happen—maybe we are all insane, did you think of that?"

"Take it easy, Captain," Rescher said. For a moment he felt the unreality of the whole scene. He didn't trust his senses, or his sanity. A moment of terror passed through him, like a cold knife slowly being drawn through his guts. He thought of all those asleep in the central hold of the ship. And he remembered that they could not dream. Their sleep state was deep, deliberately induced and maintained to avoid dreams. A man could suffer, even in a dream; every possible way to mark time had been taken from the sleepers. He shuddered at the impossible thought of what their unrestrained dreaming might have done in the present situation, the contortions reality might have been subjected to if their thoughts had been able to reach out from their sleeping forms. Perhaps in a small way some of their thoughts were trickling out?

He turned to say something to his troubled Captain . . .

And faced an ocean. On the far horizon it touched an azure sky, cloudless, solid in color. Below the dune he stood on, the breakers rolled in gently from the sparkling green sea.

He was afraid. A stronger mind could completely sweep away the reality of a weaker mind; control probability according to its designs; become god for a host of lesser minds. In an unjust creation this might all be possible. Who had done *this* to him?

Or was this merely himself?

He closed his eyes and tried to visualize the control room on the starship, the floorplates, the computer console with its myriad lights, the giant screens on the four walls . . .

She came up behind him on the dune and locked her arms around his waist. He wrenched himself free.

"Rita!"

Her eyes looked up at him invitingly from where she lay on the sand. She was so much more vivid, more sensual, than he had remembered.

"You're on the other ship," he said. And he knew with a sadness that it was not her, only his dream of her. This Rita was too willing, too ready for him. This was his world, and he knew that he could not let it go on.

But she persisted. She got up from the sand and came to him and said, "Oh Frank, I miss the exertion of it with you!" She folded herself into his arms like a child and put her cheek against his chest.

He held her briefly, then pushed her away. He had to end it, unless he wanted to talk only to himself and leave other *persons* out of it; most of the reasons for living demanded that there be other people, other minds. He was suddenly afraid of Hoyt. The temptation was great, and he knew what the other man must be struggling with. He gathered his will. It would have to be a public uni-

verse, to make any sense. The three of them would have to will it so, and make provision for others to enter it later on. He hoped that the officers on the two other starships felt the same way, or he would never see Rita again. When the three expanding fields met, what would happen then? And when would they meet?

"I suppose it is possible for the three realities—one for each ship—to integrate," Dunn was saying. "And in that case we would be able to communicate with them. But there is no reason to think that it will necessarily happen, Captain."

Rescher was back in the control room. Had he ever left it? Captain Hoyt was on his feet, standing next to Jay. Both men were looking at the active forward screen, waiting.

Rescher was glad that he had broken the continuity of his dream, insuring that it would not become permanent. He was glad to be sharing a reality with Dunn and Hoyt again. Silently he went over to where they stood and joined their watch. A sense of comradeship became their reality as they watched the screen, and Rescher knew that each had faced the same temptation . . . and had resisted.

They watched the screen in silence, watched the new bodies rushing past them, knowing that their bubble of reality was expanding and would perhaps meet with two others. Would the others be radically different? Rescher wondered what he would feel when the time came. A man continues to function because his mind strikes a balance between order and chaos, between the known and unknown; if sanity prevailed in the other two ships then the new cosmology would be acceptable. Each of the other six movers, the waking officers aboard the other starships, were educated, trained men with similar outlooks. How much conflict of probabilities would there be when the expanding bubbles met? As much conflict as there normally is among human beings, he told himself.

But still, perhaps each bubble *had* to be an individual cosmos . . . and could they ever merge?

Human minds, souls—any word would do—were now the only objectively certain facts besides the flux-like nature of the unformed plenitude which could become an infinity of possible worlds; and human minds would inevitably choose a certain range of possibilities. Wouldn't they?

What if each other ship chose a totally personal universe?

He would never see Rita again. . . .

The mind was a fairly constant thing, he told himself, a source of order and directing capacity; about them was the irrational, which here and there in the multi-dimensional stretches of infinite gray "stuff", the mind would succeed in shaping for a time and setting upon a course. The ruling principle of any viable cosmos was evolutionary, but not only in the sense of strict derivation of one thing from the thing coming before it, but also in the possibility of discontinuity, unpredictable emergence: novelty, true creation. He felt uncertain again. If this essentially irrational possibility was stifled no change would be possible; and yet if this possibility were stronger than stability, anomalies of a serious order would set in, playing havoc with physical regularities and ending with the total cancellation of the continuum.

What is needed, Rescher thought as he watched the screen, is the attitude that our universe might just *become* the best of all possible worlds, but never be certain about it. This kind of thinking might just provide the open sequence of combinations which would produce new things without end, thus avoiding the boredom of certainty and the chaos of uncertainty.

"Hey, Frank." Dunn nudged him with his arm. "I think the computer may have something for us." They both looked at Hoyt. The Captain's face was strangely drawn as he stared at the screen, as if a shadow had been drawn across his face.

The computer sang what seemed to Rescher a row of twelve notes, and said:

PROBABLE NATURE OF EMERGENT
CONTINUUM EVOLUTIONARY MATTER
ENERGY DISTINCT EXPANDING SPATIAL
DISTRIBUTION OF MATTER STAR-
PLANET-GALAXY-METAGALAXY GROUP-
INGS SEQUENCE INORGANIC-ORGANIC-
EPIORGANIC EXPANSION-CONTRACTION
AND EVOLUTIONARY TIME SCALES CAN-
NOT BE DETERMINED AT PRESENT

Briefly, Rescher thought of old sol, discarded now like an empty nautilus shell when its living center has fled. Perhaps it would be washed up somewhere.

The computer said:

TIME OF MAXIMUM INDETERMINACY
IMMINENT.

The darkness was complete.

The handprint in the cement was being made.

But whose?

In his aloneness Rescher thought he heard the screams of all the possible creations which had now been excluded. Were the other ships and Rita forever beyond him now?

Why the darkness?

Deep inside himself he felt a shuddering, a shaking, as if a great mass had slammed into him. Space became white, then black in a rapid sequence of black-white-black-white-black-white . . . A question came and its meaning terrified him . . . blackness buried him . . . white blinded him . . . but he knew he would have to give an answer before the darkness could claim him for itself, and he would spend eternity in its embrace.

Why should there be anything?

Why should there be not only . . . nothing?

Rescher screamed his defiance, as the darkness crept into his being and caressed him.

He hated it.

Because it wanted to keep him from Rita, from his future, from the sight of his sons and daughters, from the feel of clean air in his lungs, the sight of sky and sea. There was only one answer to the darkness which could ever work.

It is my will that there be something.

He imagined he saw three bubbles of force merge, and the great edge of reality fled from him like the skin of an expanding balloon, growing larger with infinite speed. He felt a rocking motion, a tearing, the inner-outer sensation of three realities trying to merge, and failing. Three bubbles of force pushing at each other like three Portuguese Men-of-War trying to become one, three jellyfish trying to absorb one another, and at last failing, content now to be together but still distinct: three precious stones in the same setting, they would never be one.

The screens in the control room were lit with the splendour of vast starfields, of stars very close together, some perhaps only a light-year apart. Rescher looked at the color filled expanse and a great surge of emotion swept through him. This was what they had aimed for when they had left the stricken solar system: the dream made real. Here would be born a civilization which would easily span a thousand worlds.

"Frank, come here," Dunn said sharply.

He turned to look at him kneeling beside Captain Hoyt on the floor.

"He's dead!"

Rescher took a step and knelt next to Dunn. Hoyt's eyes were still open, staring into the darkness to which he had not been able to give an answer; the action of a prideful man who in the end had been unable to believe

that so much depended on his will. The authority of reality had always come to him from *outside* himself, the strictures of duty and so-called hard facts. The face was pale, as if a shadow was draped over it. On earth he had left no one, and there was no one for him on any of the other ships.

Dunn reached over and closed the eyes, and touched him affectionately on the right shoulder. Then he stood up. "Do you think we can raise one of the other ships? Will it be possible?"

Rescher looked up at him briefly. The man was looking for something to do, to avoid revealing the tears in his eyes.

"Hey, Frank," Dunn said, "all the stiffs below, they've slept through the Creation. What are we going to tell them?" And he went off toward the main control console by the forward screen.

Rescher stood up and looked down at the body of Hoyt, who had stopped . . . living. His huge frame seemed a bit too small for his green coveralls.

He looked up at the forward screen. It would be a *common* universe after all. At least for Dunn and himself and all those who would waken to see it. They would be talking with the other two ships soon . . .

And he would see Rita. But would it be her? Even if the three bubbles had not merged, there would be a Rita and there would be two other ships. His mind had seen to that. She would be *a* Rita, permanent now despite himself. In time perhaps her personality might diverge from the original who existed somewhere in one of the two other universes—he would love her just the same.

And doubt her.

Elsewhere the *real* Rita might have her version of himself; would she doubt him?

Everything in all three universes, he thought, would be just a bit off. Lovers would be just a little too much like what each expected, but perhaps that wasn't such a bad idea. But again, he reminded himself, everyone

would begin to diverge after the creation, and would become different.

At least there would *be* other people, real people. What did a man really want but the happiness of those he loved? Growth; a little bit of difference, a lot of the familiar, the unexpected, the effectiveness of one's will, mystery and a little more than he could ever know. A man could be a small divinity in his own realm. Poised between the infinity of the large and small he could grasp both.

Almost.

He could share the unfolding variety of a myriad things with other minds, companions who like himself were set like the interlocking faces of diamonds in the fabric of eternity.

Is there a lesson to be learned from another's yesterdays?

TEACHING PRIME

Leo P. Kelley

Two of the children failed to make it to the eduarena. One fell in a flooded gully that had been caused by careless, not to mention illegal, strip mining and drowned within minutes. The other child ate berries that had been chemically corrupted and died almost instantly.

The others, more than a little bit proud of themselves for having survived the daily journey, scampered into the eduarena and slid into their assigned seats. As the force field sprang up outside, they finally relaxed.

The Roboteach swiveled back and forth on the oiled stage as it checked attendance and erased the names of the two dead children from its roster tapes.

"Comparative Galactic Ecosystems," it announced in its neutral, neutered voice. "Notes must be taken. Nuances may be noted. Parallels are to be drawn. Conclusions can be reached and reported at session's end. Are we ready?"

"We are ready!" chanted the children in their young voices.

"I'm not," a student whispered to his companion beside him. "This stuff is a waste of time."

"Well, we got to pass it anyway or we won't get into Highered later on," his friend whispered with resignation.

"It won't help me earn a living," the first student persisted.

"It might," his friend speculated. "Who knows?"

"Silence," spat the Roboteach. "Silence, please, while your attention is paid to the holographic simulation of forthcoming comparative galactic ecosystems. The Level has been adjusted for students who have seen but seven sets of seasons pass."

The lights dimmed and the edurena seemed to expand as the holographic screens began to project their vividly dimensional lesson for the day.

Moving out among the children, the figures began to act out their programmed dramas.

The children watched the multicellular inhabitants of the Planet Saurus as they went about their daily tasks in the misty mountains and thin air. The Saurians slid and billowed about, their many eyes alert, their tails held high in their nervous signaling to one another.

"Heat kills," grunted one Saurian as several of his cells atrophied under the onslaught of the sun beaming down through the magnification lens above the fields of sprouting seeds the workers were harvesting.

"Heat's hell," moaned another mournfully as the mists were vanquished by the yellow eye glaring down through the smooth glass.

"Sweet water, sweet water," sang one of the workers hours later as it fought for space in the small cool mud wallow at the edge of the raped fields.

The watching children in the edurena giggled at the grotesque rhythm of the creature's words.

A child impulsively raised her hand and told the Roboteach that her best friend had been drowned earlier on the way to class. Why couldn't some of their rainwater, she asked, be shipped to the Planet Saurus since the Saurians sure did seem to need it pretty bad. She said there was too much water outside anyway. It was always raining, she complained, since the Agroeconomists ruined the atmospheric balance.

The Roboteach told her she was perceptive but instructed her to please keep quiet until the entire sequence was properly completed.

The Saurian's flesh steamed in the relentless sun which caused the mud wallow to dry up. The child whose best friend had drowned began to cry and had to be led away lest her wailing disrupt the lesson.

The holographic screens shifted and the Saurians slid sluggishly into the empty shadows and out of sight.

Words danced gaily among the children.

DICK AND JANE. SEQUENCE TWO. COMPARATIVE GALACTIC ECOSYSTEMS. PAY YOUR ATTENTION.

"Ooohhh!" sighed the children as Dick and Jane bounced happily out among them.

Dick was tall and blond and he had blue eyes above a very nice nose. His lips were the right size but he couldn't seem to close them. His smile kept getting in the way.

Jane stood beside him, gazing fondly up into his blue eyes with her chocolate colored ones. Her hair gleamed with setspray and her dress, which glittered with green sequins, reached as far as her upper thighs and then gave up and vanished. It avoided her pert breasts, leaving them bare. She ran slim and unringed fingers through her stiff discolored hair and continued gazing contentedly into Dick's eyes.

Dick flexed the many muscles in his arms for no apparent purpose. They bulged and rippled beneath the sheer sleeves of his yellow tunic. He looked all around him, turning first this way, then that way.

"Where is Spot?" he asked Jane. "Spot is not here."

"No, Spot is not here," Jane said. "Where is Spot?"

Billy and Betty came bounding holographically and happily into the middle of the eduarena.

"Hello, Mother," Billy said.

"Hello, Father," Betty said.

"Hello, Billy," Jane said.

"Hello, Betty," Dick said. "Where is Spot?"

"Here comes Spot," Billy said. "See Spot run."

"Spot runs fast," Betty said.

She picked up a bright red rubber ball and threw it very high into the air. Spot barked and ran after it. The ball rolled across the macadam outside the box of their house and into the middle of the superhighway that ran beside it.

The monocars streamed steadily past and over the dog's body without stopping or caring.

"Spot is not here," Billy said.

"Is Grandmother here?" Betty asked.

"Yes," said Dick. "Grandmother is in the house. Go into the house and see Grandmother, Betty."

Betty went obediently up the path to the house. She walked past the gun turrets growing up out of the grassless ground and she waded through the strewn garbage. She entered the small square structure and called out to Grandmother.

The others followed her, coughing from the fumes that spewed forth from the monocar mechanisms.

"Happy Birthday, Grandmother," Betty said as she kissed her Grandmother.

"Thank you, Betty. Thank you very much. I am going now."

"Goodby," Betty said.

"You have had a good life, Mother," Jane said. "The Euthanasia Exit is down the block. It is next door to the Crime Corps Complex."

"I have had a good life," Grandmother said. "Forty years is a good long time."

Grandmother picked up her knapsack and her pistol and went to the front door of the one-room house. She turned and waved goodby to Dick and Jane. She bent and kissed Billy and Betty.

"The Brentwoods who live next door," said Jane, "have bought new guns with telescopic sights."

"The bounty on Grandmothers was raised again this month," Dick said.

Grandmother hurried out of the house, glancing furtively across the mounds of garbage at the Brentwood house where steel turrets gleamed now and then amid the clouds of carbon monoxide.

Betty clapped her hands. "See Grandmother run!"

"Grandmother runs fast!" Billy cried.

They all watched Grandmother run through the fusillade of Brentwood bullets, firing back grimly.

"Hurrah!" Billy cried. "They missed her!"

Jane smiled. "Grandmother runs very fast. Now it is time to sleep."

Billy took a peyote button out of his pocket and began to chew it.

Betty went and got the spoons and the glassine envelopes and the hypodermic needles and the little Bunsen burner.

They heated the heroin in the spoons and then injected it expertly into their veins.

"Sweet dreams, Billy," Jane said.

"Sweet dreams, Betty," Dick said.

They sat down on the dirty floor and began to nod.

In the edurena, the lights changed and deepened to indicate the passage of time.

"Good morning," Jane said to everyone.

They all wished her a good morning as Betty put the needles and the spoons and the little Bunsen burner away until later.

Outside the house, the garbage mounds, they discovered, had become miniature mountains during the long night. The sound of monocars streaming past was an endless technological lullaby. Bullets zinged familiarly in the air instead of the forgotten songs of birds.

They all huddled against the protection of the house while they watched the neighborhood's usual morning melee. Betty scurried down into a gun turret and began

firing at the Grandfather loping hopelessly along the edge of the superhighway toward the Euthanasia Exit to celebrate his fortieth birthday. She dropped him on the second shot and skipped to where he lay. She removed his identification disk and went away to collect her bounty.

"I feel sick," Dick said. "My head hurts. I am nauseous. I cannot see straight."

Jane touched his damp forehead and took his pulse. She pulled down the lower lids of his eyes. "You have botulism, Dick. It must have been in the uninspected cans of contraband stringbeans they shipped up from Mexico."

"I was very hungry," Dick said. "We had so little food all last week." He closed his eyes and fell to the macadam.

"Father is dead," Jane said.

"I am thirsty," Billy said.

"The government promised to send us some water next week," Jane said. "Wait, Billy. Wait for the unpolluted water."

"Who is that?" Billy asked, pointing to the young woman who was zigzagging up the macadam in order to avoid the bursting bullets that the neighbors were firing at her in case she turned out to be a Grandmother.

"That is Jane," Jane said. "The other lady behind her is also Jane."

The two Janes scurried past Billy and Jane and on into the house. Billy and Jane followed them inside.

"We have come for Dick," the Janes said. "It is our turn with Dick this week."

"Dick is dead," Jane told them. "He is lying outside near the uncollected garbage."

"Who is he?" the Janes asked, pointing at Billy.

"He is Billy," Jane said. "But he is only nine."

"We don't care," the woman said. "There aren't many men left since Census Control succeeded. Or women either, for that matter."

They seized Billy and dragged him from the house.

Jane was left alone. "Spot ran fast," she said to herself. "Dick had a very nice nose. Betty shoots true. Billy is gone away. I—"

The Crime Corps burst into the house without bothering to knock and arrested Jane for littering.

"I am innocent," Jane said.

"You let Dick lie on the public macadam outside where he fell," the Crime Corps Commander accused. "You littered."

"I am—" Jane began.

"Dead," said the Commander as he shot her and she fell. "The punishment must fit the crime."

The eduarena environment altered suddenly. The light shifted. The bodies of Dick and Jane disappeared. The Roboteach tapped his baton to attract the children's attention.

"What happened to Dick and Jane?" he asked.

"They died," the children responded.

"More than that, much more," the Roboteach insisted with a show of almost impish impatience. "I will show you cue cards to help you think of the right answer. Look up at the overhead screen, please, and pay your attention."

A multicelled and many-eyed figure appeared on the screen.

"Name?" inquired the roboteach.

"Saurian," a student called out.

"Correct."

Click: a bird.

"Peregrine falcon," someone volunteered.

"Correct."

Click: a striped animal.

"Sabre-tooth tiger," the children chorused.

Click: another bird.

"Passenger pigeon."

Click: a picture of Dick, Jane, Jane, Jane, Billy and Betty.

"What have all these species in common?" inquired the Roboteach.

"They are all extinct," a student announced with young pomp.

"True," said the Roboteach.

"But Betty didn't die," someone protested. "Neither did Billy. The two Janes took Billy away. Betty went to get her bounty."

"You are in error," the Roboteach announced solemnly. "You were not paying your full attention. I shall reinstate the environment. Now watch closely this time."

The scene in which Betty leaned over to remove the Grandfather's identification disk reappeared in the edu-arena. The children watched closely as Betty ran along the edge of the superhighway. They ignored all other details in the scene this time. They saw the monocar glide to a halt and the driver reach out and drag Betty into the car where he strangled her and tore from her hand the identification disk. They saw him mark another X on the broad dashboard of his monocar and speed away in the direction of the Bounty Collection Center.

"But what about the two Janes and Billy?" the children cried, eager now to be right in their answers.

They were shown what had happened—what they had failed to notice the first time. The Janes fought one another for possession of Billy. He fought both of them. But the Brentwood bullets cut them all down just in case they might turn out to be Grandmothers and a Grandfather.

"Extinct species, locus Earth," the Roboteach intoned. "What then is the point of today's lesson?"

"Who says there is one?" snickered one bored student under his breath.

"The point is," said the Roboteach patiently, "that we must not let the fate of the Saurians whom you saw earlier nor that of the residents of Earth become ours here on the Planet Vorno. We must protect and preserve our environment and one another if we are to survive."

"What does *it* know?" muttered the same student who had snickered earlier. "That old Roboteach isn't even alive like us!"

He received no answer as the class was dismissed and the children of Vorno slithered out past the deactivated force field on their multiple limbs and clawed and pawed their way through the dangers surrounding them.

Two of the children did not make it home alive from the eduarena. One was caught in the crossfire between enemy soldiers from Vorno North and Vorno South. The second was struck by the landing gear of a low flying helicab.

When the survivors arrived home, their fond parents asked them what they had learned in the eduarena that day. They shrugged their scales and muttered their vague answers:

"Nothing much."

"The same old stuff."

"About Dick and Jane."

. . . is there a lesson to be learned from our own?

BEYOND THE SAND RIVER RANGE

Edward Bryant

Calvin Knifehunter rode down out of the Sand River Range with his back to the north wind and his face to the cold stars. Wind rushed powerfully through the stands of blue spruce as the horse picked a trail down the slope. The wind shouted and Cal listened to it, ignoring the cold.

A rock dislodged under the horse's hoof and the animal's hindquarters slipped downhill as it struggled to keep equilibrium. The horse found its balance.

"Easy, girl." Below, the rattle of sliding stones diminished in the darkness. The rider nudged the mare's ribs with his heel. "Come on."

The moon began to rise as the land became level. The bleakness of the open range was softened by moonlight. The timber thinned and disappeared, but the wind remained strong as Cal rode through the low sagebrush.

There was a fence of barbed wire and a tightly stretched gate, then the last pasture before home. The mare knew she was going home and broke into a gallop. Cal rode bareback and he felt the rhythm of the horse's muscles.

Across a dry creek bed and then the dark outbuildings. Cal swung down off the mare. The horse whickered, breathing heavily, and there was foam in her jaws.

"You've had a good vacation, right, girl? You aren't used to this." Cal led the mare into the small barn. He gave her a cursory rubdown and part of a pail of oats. Then he walked to the house.

The collie Brownie, tail wagging, waited for him on the porch. Cal knelt and rubbed between the dog's ears. The man looked up at the empty rocking chair in back of Brownie. He remembered his father endlessly rocking in that chair, growing older until he died of old age at forty-six. The rocker remained, but the empty bottles had long since been thrown away.

The door opened into light and warmth. Preceded by Brownie, Cal walked into the three-room house. His mother sat reading at the table beneath the unshaded hundred-watt bulb.

Leah Marshall Knifehunter was a tired woman. She had never been pretty, but many who knew her as a girl had attributed to her what they called "spunk." She had been the daughter of a town banker in Fremont and was theoretically fated to marry high up in the aristocracy of the rural west. But chance and unexplainable impulse had intervened and Leah married Thomas Eagle Feather Knifehunter, full blooded Shoshoni. That she "married Indian" was unforgivable. She was written out of her father's will. She was ostracized by her white friends. She was only grudgingly accepted by the Indians of the reservation. Leah had married for love.

"Was it like you remember?"

Cal sat down opposite his mother. "Yes. Four years doesn't change much up there." He was suddenly aware of the numbness in his fingers. He rubbed his hands together to warm them. "Babe's fat and lazy now. Needs to be ridden. I'll work it off her."

"You hungry?"

Cal considered. "No."

"Some venison steaks. Deer your Uncle Paul shot last winter."

"No thanks. Just not hungry. I'm going into Fremont for a while."

"Why?" There was a strange note in Leah's voice.

"Thought I'd look up some old friends."

"Be careful."

Cal laughed. "Mom, I'm not going to get in trouble. I'm a college graduate now, remember?"

His mother, grimly, "Aren't many of your old friends left."

"I know." The laughter left his voice. "But some of them aren't dead or in jail."

"Be home early?"

"Probably." His words were light again and they teased. "Mom, I'm not your baby any more."

"I know." She hesitated. "But be careful anyway."

"I will," he said, standing and taking the car keys from the table. "Keep Brownie inside until I'm gone." The last thing he saw as he closed the door was the row of old books on the shelf across the room. Worn spines and faded gilt titles: Rousseau and Bunyan, *The Book of Martyrs* and Thoreau.

The '55 Chevy bounced noisily along the two miles of ruts that joined the state highway. Cal thought of his mother making her weekly shopping trips to Fremont in this car.

Twenty miles he drove along Sand River Canyon. There was very little traffic, so he pushed the protesting engine until the car vibrated along at seventy. Then the highway angled around the flank of a mountain and Cal saw the lights of Fremont ahead. Fremont, county seat of Shoshoni County. Commercial center for the ranching community, for the reservation, for the uranium and oil people. Five thousand nice white Anglo souls, Cal thought, and wished he could work the medicine which would bring the Sand River Range sliding down on Fremont.

He was vaguely surprised at his gut reaction. Hatred,

Cal thought. Maybe school didn't civilize me as much as it was intended.

The lights of Fremont grew brighter and more distinct. The road ran down a slight grade, then across the seldom-used railroad tracks and into Main Street. Downtown Fremont was five blocks of light and noise; stores, filling stations and bars. At ten o'clock on this October night, the stores were closed. But it was the third Saturday in the month. The men from the oil fields had their pay. So did the hands off the local ranches. And the Indians had their government checks.

Cal parked a block off Main and locked the car. He walked through the downtown, seeing many faces, but none familiar. Cal was suddenly thirsty and decided to get a beer.

"Hey, you! Injun! You with the funny hair!" The shout was from behind him. Cal took his hand away from the door to the Antelope Lounge and slowly turned. His fingers curled into fists. Then he involuntarily stared and pulled a doubletake. "Davy! I'll be damned."

"Hey man, you look good." Davy White Hawk walked forward, grinning and holding out his hand.

"Long time," Cal said.

"Yeah. You home from school for good?"

"A while, maybe. Probably a year. I'm in VISTA now—be working out on the reservation. Then I figure the government'll send me to law school."

"Hey, you'll be the biggest success the tribe ever had."

"Maybe."

"You will; no sweat. How about a beer to celebrate?"

"That's what I was after when you yelled."

"At the Antelope? Hell, let's go down to the Wagon Box. They got the wildest go-go dancer you ever saw."

"I don't know," said Cal. He hesitated. "I remember before I left, the Wagon Box was kind of a hassle."

"Yeah." Davy was expressionless. "Things are different now. A little. They'll let anybody in, if they have money."

The bar was crowded and noisy. The hostess, fifty and

wrinkled in red velvet, showed them to a small table close to the juke box.

"I don't think I missed much!" Cal shouted, competing with eighty decibels of Buck Owens.

"Must be the girl's taking a break," said Davy. The barmaid set a pitcher and two glasses down hard on the table, slopping beer on the Coors napkins.

"Davy, what are you doing these days?"

"Not much." He poured carefully, not allowing a head to foam on the beer. "This and that. You know."

"Yeah, I know."

Someone lurched against the table and a wave of alcoholic breath made Cal think of a rotting carcass under the sun. By his stained work clothes a wildcatter down from the drilling rigs in the hills, the man surveyed Cal and Davy with bleary eyes. "Hey, boys," he said, slurring the 's.' "What time you dance?"

Davy half-rose, pulling back his right fist. Cal stood and grabbed his arm. "No," Cal said. "Come on."

Outside, Cal said, "Maybe things haven't changed."

"Maybe not." Davy's jaw was set tense; the skin stretched tight over high cheekbones. "We should have killed that son of a bitch."

And it all flowed back through Cal's memory, as if borne by the wind which lashed around the mercury street lamps.

Four years before. The rain had fallen in sporadic showers of large, chill drops, settling finally to a steady drizzle. The gray thunderheads had rolled, been torn apart by the wind and reunited high over the Sand Rivers. And at two in the morning, Davy's little sister Mickey had stumbled through the puddles to the Knife-hunter house.

Davy needed help, she had said. They were looking for Richard, their older brother. He had gone to Fremont in the afternoon for groceries. He hadn't come back. Awakened at midnight, a sleepy grocer claimed indig-

nantly on the phone that he hadn't seen Richard White Hawk at all. So Davy started the search.

It was Cal, Davy and Lattimer, the Indian Agent, who found him finally. As they rounded a rainslick curve by the canyon, the brights picked up a reflected gleam that could have been the eyes of an animal. They braked and looked closer and saw the skid marks black under the sheet of rain. They parked Lattimer's big Oldsmobile on the shoulder of the state highway and let the lights play on the shining object. Ungracefully the three slid down the slick grass of the embankment.

"Over here!"

The object was a chrome hubcap from a Ford pickup. The three probed beyond and turned on their flashlights. They found the truck itself about forty yards further. It lay upside down, masked from the road by clumps of tall willows.

Sick at what he knew he would find, Cal pushed ahead of Davy and shone his light in the cab. Richard was still there. Sprawled half out the window of the cab, he had been pinned by the crushed roof. He lay face down. The coroner said at the inquest that Richard White Hawk had drowned in an inch of muddy water. The ruling had been accidental death as a result of driving while intoxicated (there was a half-empty fifth of cheap whisky under the seat).

But before that, on the stormy mountainside, Davy had found a deeper reason for his brother's death. He had knelt and lifted his mother's head out of the puddled rain and cradled it silently for a few minutes. Then he had looked up at Lattimer, his face as rigid as the Sand River granite.

"You did this," he said to the Indian Agent. And that was all.

Four years later, Cal remembered the white man's eyes, pitying and paternal, as they looked silently away.

You did this, Cal's mind had echoed. Three words too simple, but sufficient. And he knew then he would do

anything, even go to the white man's college, to keep it from happening again.

"Hello, Cal."

Cal looked back and saw the same eyes, four years older, surrounded by more wrinkles but the same blue eyes. "Hello," he said.

Donald Lattimer was a career man in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He was a kind man, and a conscientious man, and he did for "his people" what he thought was right. But he was white and from a prosperous timber family in Wisconsin and there were many things about his job which he could never know.

The Indian Agent walked up to them, smiling. "Hello, Davy."

"Excuse me, I got to see somebody. See you, Cal." He turned and hurried down the sidewalk.

"We sure are proud of you, son," Lattimer said, pumping Cal's hand enthusiastically. "And coming back to help your people—well, all we can say is, that's great."

"Yeah." Come off it, thought Cal.

The white man looked weary. "You still dislike me, don't you, Cal."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Cal didn't answer.

Lattimer said, "Son, you're too much a romantic. You're really caught up emotionally in your people's whole tradition and history. Don't fight the war that ended long ago."

"I am?"

"It's over. We're not the same people who drove you out of your forests and plains and broke the treaties."

Cal was suddenly, unaccountably angry. "No? How many names should I call out? Wounded Knee, 1890. Three hundred Sioux civilians, men, women and children, massacred by U.S. troopers. Times have changed? Check your newspapers, man."

Lattimer's expression was patient. "When you were on that scholarship in California, did you take an anthropology course?"

"Yes."

"And do you remember learning anything about two cultures on a collision course?"

Cal realized he might have underestimated the man. He said, as though quoting the textbook, "In the conflict of two societies, the technologically superior culture usually emerges dominant."

"Not *usually*, Cal. *Always*. History bears that out."

"No!"

Lattimer looked down at the dirty, cracked pavement. "Part of the losing culture may survive; often it may subvert a part of the victor. But its culture, as an entire pattern, is smashed." He raised his head and looked Cal in the eye. "That happens and both sides have to accept it. They have to work with it."

Cal's words were very low and clear. "Man, you're arrogant. So goddamned arrogant. And someday it's going to bring you down."

"I'm sorry. I'm just trying to be honest."

Something was wrong. Cal looked around and realized he and Lattimer were alone on the street. There was a metallic rattle as the wind drove an empty aluminum beer can down the sidewalk. It rolled against Cal's boot and stopped.

Down the block the door of the Antelope Lounge opened and Davy White Hawk ran down the street toward them.

"Where is everybody?" Cal yelled.

"Inside. Watching TV in the bars. Man, you're missing it. Biggest show of the century." Davy was gasping, out of breath.

"What's this?" said Lattimer.

"News show, every channel. Goddamn aliens."

"Aliens?" Lattimer looked puzzled.

"Space people, somebody. Flying saucer or something."

Infinity Three

Big round thing, glows white, big as a goddam mountain. Landed outside New York."

For once Lattimer's fatherly composure was disturbed. "This is true?"

Davy stared. "So help me, it's true. Big goddam round thing. TV says it's from another star or something. Scientists figure they're maybe thousands of years ahead of us."

The wind rose and whistled around the cornices of the Shoshoni County Courthouse on the next block.

"A thousand years ahead," said Cal.

Lattimer was not an unintelligent man. He turned away as Cal looked up at the cold stars above the Sand River Range and began to laugh.

Notes from Infinity . . .

Edward Bryant has in the short space of four years established himself as a favorite with readers of shorter science fiction, and a constant delight for editors. Dissatisfied with the present state of our world, he seems to be an observer apart. He will be around for some time to come . . . hopefully forever.

Miriam Allen deFord is a sprightly octogenarian who has been delighting mystery and science fantasy fans for nearly half a century. Living in San Francisco, she continues to turn out entertaining stories at a pace that astonishes the younger generations.

Terry Dixon makes his second appearance in print with *A BARD'S TALE*. His first story, *HATE IS A SAND-PAPER ICE CUBE WITH POLKA DOTS OF LOVE ON IT*, appeared in William F. Nolan's *THE FUTURE IS NOW* anthology, and has been acquired for filming by Web-E Productions. A recent student, he is another member of the dissatisfied generation who hopes to see tomorrow come to a world totally unlike that of today.

Ron Goulart is over thirty, though not drastically so. A few years ago he gave up a life of luxurious if uncertain

indolence in the world of advertising to come to Connecticut . . . and a life of uncertain if luxurious indolence as a full-time writer. Author of many novels and short story collections, his newest novel, *SHAGGY PLANET*, will be published later this year by Lancer Books.

Robert Hoskins, editor of the *INFINITY* series, is also general editor of Lancer's science fiction program. This volume marks his eighth science fiction anthology; the ninth, *WONDERMAKERS*, an anthology of classic science fiction, is being released almost simultaneously by Fawcett Premier Books. Other anthology projects are in various stages of completion, including *INFINITY FOUR*.

Gerald Hull, co-author with George Zebrowski of *THE MONADIC UNIVERSE*, is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at the State University of New York at Binghamton. No other information is currently available.

Leo P. Kelley spent a number of years working in publishing until the urge to become his own boss became too strong to resist. He currently is a full-time freelancer, with many novels already published. He lives on the south shore of Long Island.

Dean R. Koontz gave up teaching a few years ago to become a full-time writer, and now has more than thirty books to his credit, including s-f, mysteries, gothic suspense and non-fiction. His first hardcover novel will soon be published by Random House, while he has recently completed a text on *WRITING GENRE FICTION*, which will be published by the *Writer's Digest*.

Dean McLaughlin has been an occasional writer of very good science fiction for many years—too occasional. There have been too many gaps between appearances.

His novels include *THE MAN WHO WANTED STARS*, published by Lancer Books.

Barry N. Malzberg has been writing science fiction for the past five years, using the pseudonym of *K. M. O'Donnell*. He has tried valiantly for much of that time to reclaim his identity, but the *O'Donnell persona* has become so strongly established that editors have refused to let the alter die. There comes a point however when every creator finds it necessary to gain the upper hand over his creation, from the time of Baron Frankenstein on until today. Malzberg states that *O'Donnell* is dead; there has been no public statement from *O'Donnell*, though the latter may be justified in claiming that indeed Malzberg is the one to have died. Malzberg's first hard-cover s-f novel, *BEYOND APOLLO*, will be published by Random House in June.

John Ossian is believed to be Australian, at least in intent. He is somehow involved with the inner workings of s-f fandom *Down Under*.

Richard Posner works for a major literary agent during the day, and at his typewriter nights. He has already sold several novels while his short stories have sold to markets that include major general magazines such as the *Ladies' Home Journal*. *A DAY IN THE WAR* is his first published science fiction story.

Robert Silverberg is a man of whom nothing can be said, except by repetition. He approaches his twentieth year as a professional writer of whom almost every other professional is envious, his work constantly changing, constantly stimulating. He marks his third appearance in *INFINITY* with *CALIBAN*.

Clifford D. Simak has been one of the foremost writers of s-f for forty years, since the days of Hugo Gernsback's

Wonder Stories. His novels are too numerous to record; his area is special unto himself. A Simak story is almost always unmistakable . . . and unforgettable.

Anthony Weller is the youngest contributor to this volume, and perhaps the youngest writer of science fiction to ever be professionally published. *ANTIQUITY* was written when he was twelve; now aged to thirteen, he is a student at Phillips Exeter Academy. His father is a noted foreign correspondent, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, while his mother is well known as a teacher of ballet.

Gene Wolfe admits to being somewhat older than the preceding listed contributor, even to also being beyond thirty. Despite his crossing that unspeakable barrier of age, he is considered a member of the new generation of s-f writers.

Chelsea Quinn Yarbro is Secretary of the Science Fiction Writers of America, a demanding job that leaves little time for the pursuit of her own writing career. Still, she manages to come out with a number of excellent stories, and is a welcome addition to the growing rank of female writers of s-f.

George Zebrowski has been teacher of a course in science fiction on the college level, while his own stories have appeared in most of the s-f magazines and many original anthologies. He lives in New York State and is currently editor of *The Bulletin of the Science Fiction Writers of America*. His first novel, *THE OMEGA POINT*, will be published later this year by Ace Books. A second *MACROLIFE* will be published by Charles Scribner's Sons.

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